

Cultures in Motion

AN INTRODUCTION

Daniel T. Rodgers

FOR HISTORIANS, place has been almost as foundational as gravity is to physics. A sense of bounded, stable location frames most of their professional identities and still saturates most of their work. Ask most historians what they do, and they answer geographically. They are historians of early-modern Europe, the preconquest Americas, ancient Rome, or modern Japan. Time provides the adjective; but the noun is place. The site in question may be a nation (France, Brazil), a continent (Africa), a city (London), a region (the American West), an empire (Roman, Soviet), or any of the precisely drawn and variegated locales of microhistory. But whatever the case, a sense of place as culturally set apart, with traditions, social organization, and ways of life sharply distinct from other places, still dominates most historical work.

Across those boundaries of place, external forces may intrude and disrupt, sometimes with massive consequences, but the narrative and analytical threads stay close to location. At focus is the culture of *this* nation, the experiences of *this* indigenous people, the social customs of *this* locale. This rooted sense of time and place distinguishes history from the social sciences that imagine that their general laws of economic or political behavior can be set down virtually anywhere with equally illuminating results.

And yet, place is not as stable or as neatly bounded as it once seemed to be. It has been almost two decades since history's sister discipline, anthropology, was overwhelmed by crisis over the match between culture and location. The axiom of Boasian anthropology, that if one got far enough from modernity one could find stable, largely homogenous culture islands, mapped neatly onto space, waiting for the ethnographic field worker to decode them, gave way to an unnerving realization that all those culture regions were, like the anthropologists' own societies, porous, heterogeneous, and interconnected. They were meeting places of cultures, entrepôts of goods and practices, nodes of translation and accommodation. Only the sleight of hand of the anthropologist had ever made them seem otherwise.

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In its desire to classify and stabilize the spatially distinct cultures of the world, James Clifford wrote in the new critical vein, anthropology had failed to appreciate the real world's "restless movements of peoples and things." Cultures overflowed their fixed locations. They were not divided up "cleanly at the joints," even Clifford Geertz admitted. Their connections were as salient as their distinctions and had, indeed, always been so. In this recognition of "the refusal of cultural products and practices to 'stay put,'" as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson put it in 1992, the hope of constructing a human atlas of locationally differentiated cultures and folkways evaporated. In its place, contemporary anthropology has spawned an uprooted vocabulary of diasporas, transculturations, entanglements, and zones of cultural friction.¹

More slowly, historians have begun to come to the same realization. In contemporary historical writing, older implicit historical geographies are increasingly being challenged by models of worlds in motion. In the fields of modern history, "transnational" is an agenda and a buzzword. Borderlands studies, diaspora studies, Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean studies, studies of cultural transfer, and studies of interwoven histories have loosened many of the assumptions of stable, place-grounded tradition or localized social character that were common not long ago. Goods and fashions have circulated widely for centuries, bringing with them new social distinctions and new understandings of community and self. Ideas and ideologies travel. So do technologies and the practices of everyday life. Early modern science, it is now widely suggested, was made not through the local genius of Galileo's Pisa or Isaac Newton's Cambridge, but in a confluence of ideas and practices that swept through the trade routes of the early modern world. Religious systems have circulated across vast distances, morphing continually as they moved. "For the historian who is willing to scratch beneath the surface of [the] sources," Sanjay Subrahmanyam writes, "nothing turns out to be quite what it seems in terms of fixity and local rootedness."²

Peoples and nations have resisted the motion that has swirled around them, of course. They have feared the invasion of external cultural practices as often as they have coveted the moving bits of culture. They have set up barriers to the strange and exotic. They have invented stories of themselves and their homeland ties, elaborated and fought over their claims, and instantiated them in nations and kingdoms. But their very construction of place and culture has occurred within larger worlds of motion.

All this is becoming increasingly familiar across the subfields of history. But because historians' second thoughts about cultures, place, and motion have come without the intense disciplinary self-interrogation of the anthropologists, the new impulses in the historical discipline remain scattered and ad hoc. The very vocabularies for thinking beyond older,

more stable notions of location and culture are still in formation. Like all emerging fields, this one is in search of models, analytical tools, and frameworks.

It is into this ferment that the essays of *Cultures in Motion* are offered. Ranging widely across locations and times, they seek to open the core questions, explore the key motifs, and offer models for writing histories of societies and cultures when none of the older containers of place are what they once seemed to be. They vary in their emphases; they tackle different aspects of their core theme. But together they begin to mark out the dimensions of this emerging field, its challenge to historians, and the promise it contains. Our subject is not the new “transnational” history or world history, both of which have been discussed in many prominent forums. The porousness of place is much older than the nation or the “transnational,” and the global stage is only one of many scales of cultural intersection.³ Our focus is not on the movement of peoples across space, bringing (as best they could) their cultural practices with them—a rich and important subject in its own right, renewed now in an age of global refugees, migrants, and deterritorialized workers.⁴ Our core focus is on the ways in which, from earliest to most recent times, cultural practices have crossed the boundaries of place that human communities have constructed, unsettling social and cultural relations, keeping even spatially rooted cultures in motion.

The essays collected here are ventures into this emerging field. They offer stories of intrusion, translation, resistance, and adaptation. They are experiments in writing histories of cultural motion where nothing—dance rhythms, alchemical formulas, practices of charity, feminist aspirations, medical techniques, sewing machines, or labor networks—stays fixed quite where we imagined it was supposed to be.

Two areas of study were critically important in helping to break apart older, simpler assumptions of place and culture. Together they shaped much of the vocabulary of this emerging field. And for better and for worse, their legacies hang over it still, sometimes as theory, more often as an unexamined phrase or premise.

The first was a striking renewal of historians’ interest in empire. Some of the new interest in the histories of empire was the work of Asian, African, and Latin America historians seeking to rebalance the global historical formulas that had for so long placed the national histories of Europe and the United States at the center. Still more was generated by recognition that the age of empire was hardly past. Its legacies were written into postcolonial structures of power, economy, and culture throughout the once colonized and colonizing worlds. The migration of millions of workers from the reaches of the early-twentieth-century empires to their

former metropolises could not but catch the attention of European historians who had let their focus turn inward onto domestic and national concerns. Even historians of the United States remembered that it, too, had an empire.⁵

In contrast to older histories of empire that had stressed trade and administration, the new histories of empire turned a much sharper gaze to interactions of culture. None of the new imperial historians doubted that empires' *raison d'être* was the mobilization and extraction of resources through a combination of projected force and domination. Nor did any of the new accounts minimize the ways in which the colonizers marked off the conquered and the colonized as radically other than themselves or imposed on those others, wherever they could, systems of racial difference and social subordination. And yet in the course of those imperial projects, and even across fiercely guarded boundaries of difference, cultural materials of all sorts were transported. Religious practices, gender constructs, manners, print, education, labor practices, notions of civilization and science, public health practices and biopolitics, ideas and ideologies were set in motion, where they collided and mixed with different cultural practices across the globe. From the fifteenth century onward, military conquest, massive movements of slave and semifree labor, and massive reroutings of plants, germs, animals, consumer goods, and raw materials literally reterritorialized the world. The peoples of the colonized world bore the massive brunt of the empires' impact, but it is an axiom of the new imperial history that the relations of empire also sharply unsettled social and cultural practices at the empires' Euro-American cores. Layered atop an older emphasis on systems and structures, the new histories of empire began to map a world of cultural trespass and continuous cultural motion.⁶

The empires these studies describe have virtually no resemblance to the uniform washes of color that the textbooks still routinely splash on their maps. The new histories have laid their stress, rather, on the mixtures and compounds, on the things out of place, on the "intermeshed transculturations" that empires made. They were complex and entangled worlds, with their middle grounds, contested borders, and contact zones. Brokers and intermediaries were essential to the administration of empire: persons and peoples, creoles and cultural *métis*, who found their niche, however anxiously and provisionally, in the empires' in-between places of culture and power.⁷ The condition of postcoloniality, as cultural theorists now name it, maps a similarly uneven world of "migrant hybrids" and "in-between" cultural locations: a condition of space and time, as Homi Bhabha put it, where nothing is at "home."⁸

If the new inquiries into the relationship between culture and empire helped to break down older and more stable notions of place, the still stronger impetus in this direction has been the experience of contempo-

rary globalization. Historians, it is fair to say, came to the debate over globalization with a certain professional skepticism. It was an axiom in most of the historians' forums on global economic integration that many of the characteristics that fell under the globalization rubric were not nearly as novel as the op-ed columns and the best-seller lists proclaimed. Dense patterns of exchange serving to integrate spatially distant economies were not novelties of the contemporary world order, most historians countered. They had left their mark on cultures from earliest times all over the globe.⁹ But the intensity of talk about global integration, whether in the newspaper columns or in the anti-World Trade Organization street rallies in Seattle, had no precedent, and historians were hardly immune from its influences. When the clothes historians wore were now pieced together by workers across the globe, when they could download "world music" onto their iPods and roam worlds of referents on the Internet, when they could traverse a world of conferences without ever leaving the neighborhood of a sushi bar, a sharp new interest in goods, cultures, and peoples in motion could not but gather force in history faculties.

Part of what was at stake in the globalization debates was yet another reterritorialization of the world—a postnational order, some said, in which local, international, and transregional relations were more important arenas of power and culture than the nation-states. But the stronger motif in the globalization rhetoric was flux itself. Goods circled the world; finance capital moved at lightning speed; the new media penetrated even the most repressive of regimes. Cultural fashions moved virtually instantly from place to place, sometimes in the guise of liberation, sometimes as carriers of a new, mobile traditionalism. That very flux and instability, it was said, promoted reaction, as peoples caught in the tides of change struggled to create "traditional" religious or ethnic identities that they could imagine to be above the swirl of change. New forms of local consciousness were produced within these shifting fields of force. The dominant theme in the globalization debates, however, was the relentless pressure of external force and the porousness and vulnerabilities of place. If, as historians insisted, the phenomenon of contemporary globalization was a repetition (on a new scale and speed) of very old and familiar historical phenomena, then there was reason to think that place had always been more open to cultural materials in motion than they themselves had recognized.

Studies of empire and globalization not only helped, in these ways, to normalize and bring into focus the phenomenon of traveling cultures, loosening overbounded notions of place. They have also been, with mixed results, the principal sources of the analytical language with which historians have undertaken to describe what happens wherever cultural practices intersect.

There had been an older analytical language for these purposes, to be sure, borrowed from functionalist social theory. When pressed by new ideas, institutions, and social forces, it was routinely said, cultures “adapt” and “adjust.” They react as Darwinian organisms react to invasions or to new environments, reorganizing themselves in response to pressures from outside. They incorporate the intruding elements into blends and adaptive cultural strategies, minimizing the cultural strain by folding elements of the new and the old together. Religious syncretism provided a paradigmatic example. The old gods did not capitulate even when massively challenged, writers in this vein suggested; they persisted, adaptively reclothed in the religious gestures and language of the new orthodoxies. The study of adaptive modernization strategies formed another well-worked example.¹⁰ These strain-and-readjustment models were never very good models of cultural change, and they have now largely run their course. They homogenized societies too readily, elided questions of power and internal contest, stabilized too easily the products of these disruptions, and trivialized the productive cultural capacities at work.

The historian interested in cultural influences now talks not of functional adaptation but, in a more sophisticated and subtle analytical language, of hybridity, *métissage*, creole cultures, cultures of the middle ground, or “third spaces.” All of these are now keywords in contemporary historical studies. They foreground the productive, the unstable, and the unexpected consequences of cultural collision and exchange. They speak to the liminal geographies of cultural intersection and to the plurality and fluidity of its outcomes. They foreground the absence of neat fit between the cultural elements fused together, the “unhomeliness,” in Bhabha’s words, of the phenomenon’s extraordinarily varied products.

But *sotto voce* many of the new terms also speak of empire. They threaten to reproduce, even in their critique, the imperializers’ way of seeing. The idea of the “middle ground” that Richard White made famous in his luminous history of the upper Great Lakes region in early North American history is a case in point. It is not clear that indigenous peoples mapped the landscape just beyond the edges of the European empires in this distinctive way, but the colonizers certainly did. Middle grounds were places where the power of empire unraveled enough that preponderance of violence or military force could no longer be relied on, and trade, negotiation, and brokered and ad hoc arrangements came to the fore. For both the native peoples and the French, White makes clear, they were sites of fluid social arrangements and creative cultural misunderstandings, where kin, gender, commerce, and authority relations were all in a degree of flux. But for native peoples, in-between spaces of this sort were certainly far more common than for the French. They were a

normal and ubiquitous part of the social and cultural landscape wherever indigenous societies met and rubbed up against one another. Only for the French invaders was this a distinctive “middle” ground where strategies of war and trade had to be fundamentally reconceived. “Middle” can be conceived only between poles. Explicitly or tacitly, monoliths border and define it. The presence of empire hangs, in this way, over the very effort to think beyond and outside it.¹¹

If the imperializers, pressing their way into others’ territory through conquest, conversion, and resource hunger, carried with them distinctive ways of mapping space, still more they brought distinctly imperial ways of mapping peoples. Colonizers and indigenous peoples, racialized Selves and racialized Others, were the key binaries in these imperial anthropologies. The colonizers imposed these categories of difference with a fiercely anxious determination. What made it all the more anxious was that the categories never fit with anything near the clarity—us/them, ruler/ruled, civilized/savage—that the imperializers desired. On the conditions that they themselves created, the imperializers were surrounded by peoples in between. The creole populations produced by the sexual interpenetration of colonizers with the colonized were indispensable to the imperializers’ projects of labor management and governance. But they were also, at the same time, objects of the colonizers’ fearful fantasy and desire. The collaborators who moved into the cultural gap between colonized and colonizers as interpreters and functionaries, occupiers of the in-between spaces of power that the empires offered, were often no less feared. When Rudyard Kipling wrote of Hurree Babu, the strange, shape-shifting Bengali who spouts yards of queerly ornamented English, who scorns the British imperial Raj even as he joins Kim in gathering intelligence for the British and yearns for acknowledgment by the British Royal Society, his cultural patchwork marked him as a “monstrous hybridism.”¹²

The initial appearance of that now-ubiquitous term “hybrid” into historical-cultural studies was designed precisely to underline that eruptive appearance of “monstrosity” at the sites where colonial power hoped, but disconcertingly failed, to reproduce itself. “The display of hybridity . . . terrorizes authority with the *ruse* of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery,” Homi Bhabha wrote in his widely influential essay, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” in 1985. Mimicry threatened the very chasm of difference—the “almost the same but not quite”—that the colonists had imposed. It laid claim to a promise of modernity and civilization that was meant, in fact, to be radically deferred. To stress the “hybrid” productions of empire, in these formulations, was not to stress the multicultural possibilities of interplay and fusion that the in-between spaces of empire enabled. It was, rather, to stress the way in which the discourse of the colonizers “split,” became “deformed” and “undecidable,” the way in which

“the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power” were effected but realized in barely recognizable, menacing form. To bring the hybrid productions of empire back into focus was to stand in the anxious shoes of the colonizers, within their own terrifyingly subversive ambivalence.¹³

It is safe to say that as the term “hybrid” has spread and naturalized in historical discourse, the disruptive, postmodern edge that the term possessed a decade and a half ago has almost completely dulled. It stands for variety now, for the uncountable, productive capacities where cultures meet, wash into each other, and collide. Luther Burbank, the plant hybridist who gave the world a new cornucopia of cultivars, is more often the implied reference than Homi Bhabha. Like the term “middle ground” as it escaped White’s original use, it has grown soft, metaphorical, and celebratory. But even if the presence of empire is unspoken, it haunts the analytical language that has descended from it. To write of creole cultures, of *métissage* or *mestizaje*, of hybrid economies and hybrid cultures is to write not only within the language of the imperializers’ binaries of difference but within the hard, racial logics that rode with them. These were the colonizers’ terms for the “mixed-race” products of empire, its threatening, accidental, and racially polluted upshots: for the peoples and cultures that could never be of the same value as the pure, unmixed sources that generated them. The “strange and disquieting ramifications of [their] . . . forgotten past,” as Robert Young puts it, may not haunt these terms forever. But the assumption lodged deep in their very structure is hard to scrub out of them, that what the historian is observing is a collision, however rife with possibilities, between two fully formed and mutually exclusive cultural communities, so integral and autonomous that they slip easily into the linguistic space where nineteenth-century anthropologists would have used “races.”¹⁴

To write of “hybridities” depends on the historians’ willingness to imagine purities. But what if no such purity ever existed outside the racial imaginations and terrors of the colonizers? What if every piece in these encounters was already an unstable amalgam, a hybrid from birth, already in motion?

It is at this point that the geographers’ and social theorists’ language of globalization sweeps confidently in. Exuberantly and without hesitation it declares everything in motion. “Flow” is the keyword in this literature. Information, capital, concepts, persons, and goods all flow through the models of contemporary globalization with a speed that David Harvey and others call radical “time-space compression.” Bits of culture, broken apart like detachable objects, are carried along in these streams, coming together temporarily in all manner of combinations, only to rush

on again. Hip-hop, gangster tags, designer clothing, fusion cuisine, and sampled and recombined musical styles all move through the world in this way; so do religious identifications, human rights discourses, and powerful political ideologies. In a fully networked world, Manuel Castells wrote in his influential *The Rise of the Network Society*, one would no longer speak of places at all but of temporary intersections on “the space of flows.” Sequence would give way to “timeless time.” Motion in these models is not wholly unchecked or unchanneled. Arjun Appadurai, whose writing casts a very long shadow across these formulations, suggested in his early work on the global cultural economy that persons, capital, media, and ideas should be imagined as flowing across different “scapes,” disjunct from each other and eruptive at the edges where their misalignments were most jarring. Locality, too, was produced, however unstably. But the more dominant language, including Appadurai’s own when globalization talk was at its height, was more insistently formless. One spoke of rhizomes, fractals, chaos, flows.¹⁵

Not many historians have fully embraced the terms that course through globalization talk. The notion of a global “dance of the flows and the fragments,” as the historian Frederick Cooper forcefully put it, radically underrepresents the place of power, the stark unevenness of the actual historical landscapes, the institutional channels through which economic and political forces move. In writing loosely of flows, he insists, “Crucial questions don’t get asked: about the limits of interconnection, about the areas where capital cannot go, and about the specificity of the structures necessary to make connections work.”¹⁶ Real historical space, many historians now suggest, was not flat or smoothly liquid but deeply grooved; persons and things moved on long but carefully defined circuits. The Jesuit missionaries in East and Southeast Asia in the seventeenth century sluiced bits of early modern science between nodal points across half the globe, but their circuits never touched down on most of it. Merchants and artisans who depended on mobility for their living in the early modern world moved along similarly well-inscribed itineraries. So did early medieval monarchs in the mobile display of power and presence. The mobility of some depended on the immobilizing of the lives and labors of others. The actual historical landscape of power and influence was, in Cooper’s terms, “lumpy.”

Mapping these terrains of connection and discontinuity has been an important, ongoing project. In German historiography in the 1990s there was a move to constitute a new domain of inquiry called *Transfertschichte*. With its linguistic roots in the French term *transferts* for transfers of money and tangible property and its social science methodology, *Kulturtransfertschichte* might have posed an alternative to the more formless language of flows; but locked in a heated battle with German so-

cial historians for whom stress on external cultural influences threatened to distract from the primacy of internal dynamics in German history, *Transfersgeschichte* has not had much influence outside of Germany.¹⁷ A more recent effort in this direction, Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann's agenda for intermeshed and interwoven histories, or *histoire croisée*, bids to lay across the landscape of the modern nation-states what might be imagined as overlay maps of culture zones.¹⁸ Other efforts to articulate space have pulled in still different directions. Networks have been specified: made finite and discreet. The oceans and their ports and shore lands—Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian—have become active spaces of study. “Connected histories” of all sorts are being actively written. The term “exchange,” employed so brilliantly by Alfred Crosby, is now everywhere. Routes and circuits are terms of active potential: trade routes, tourist routes, pilgrim circuits, labor migrant routes.¹⁹

And yet, historians seeking to get beyond notions of bounded place and cultures have not found it easy fully to resist the more watery language of flows or the Facebook language of infinitely ramifying networks. Complex and discontinuous as many of these new models of space and networks are, the terrains they map remain relatively flat. Cultural practices move through them with relative ease. Like all the analytical terms descended from the globalization debates, the language of fractals and flows makes connections easier to understand than blockages, mistranslations, impositions, and resistance. In this literature, the “monstrous hybridism” of Kipling's imagination is whisked from sight. The anxious, fearful collision of recognition with denial that, in Bhabha's terms, threatened the very project of domination, wilts into innocuousness. Questions of radical incommensurability between cultural languages and practices, which framed White's concept of the middle ground and made its products so fragile and unexpected, are rarely broached. Negotiation and translation are tacitly flattened out. Power dissolves into acts of communication and exchange. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's emphasis on “zones of cultural friction”—“zones of awkward engagement, where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak”—tags these deficits. Everything we know as culture, she writes, is “co-produced in the interactions I call ‘friction’: the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference.”²⁰

Like the analytical terms descended from the discourses of empire, the globalization-derived language of circuits and flows, networks and connectivity, fluid cultures and intermeshed relationships has much to offer historians. But its very geniality and looseness poses a trap and a temptation. For in sober truth, cultures don't “flow” into one another; they don't “mix” like kitchen ingredients, or “borrow” from each other with

obligations to pay things back, or “exchange” like merchants at a trade fair. Within this family of metaphors, historians face a tortuously difficult task if they are to embrace fully the features that Tsing calls “friction.”

What might an alternative analytical vocabulary look like that was pinned not to the hydraulic rhetoric of flows, the fractals of networks, the boundaries of empire, or the race-inflected language of hybridities? What are the resources for writing about “the refusal of cultural products and practices to ‘stay put’ ” that preserves the power, the multiplicity of possibilities, and the frictions in those acts of displacement? How might historians come closer to the grounds of cultural experience now that place no longer seems as bounded or impermeable as we once imagined it to be? Distilling two years of wide-ranging discussion at Princeton University’s Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies, we offer not a formula but a list of suggestions.

From Place-Rooted Cultures to Cultural Practices. The big block cultures that once dominated the anthropological textbooks, integrated in function and rooted in place, were an artifice of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century social science. Except for an occasional reappearance in discussions of world politics (where a unitary Islam still haunts some imaginations) or comparative policy analysis (where unchanging national values may still be brought in as a last resort to explain what other variables leave a muddle), they have disappeared from the social science vocabulary. Cultures are constituted of practices; they are made and remade continuously in performance. What moves between sites are never whole systems of value but the semidetachable parts of practice.

Practices in this sense are not acts merely, but actions laden with meaning. Music, dance, artisanal crafts, social rituals, acts of charity, practices of justice, health and medical regimes, protest movements, and gender performances have carried with them complex, shifting significance as they moved from site to site. Goods have traversed the world not as things in themselves but through practices of use and consumption, of social claims and signification. Religions, a classic case of cultural displacement, have traveled in the same way, not as block units but as practices of piety and behavior, rituals of empowerment and purification, social systems of authority, read texts and retold stories—the glue between them never altogether solid. Political cultures are made mobile as texts and performances. In recognizing cultures as complex amalgams of practices, constantly in reproduction, assumptions of simple one-to-one correspondence between place and culture, nation and *Geist*, dissolve. The incessant movement of cultural goods and practices between societies becomes imaginable.²¹

Disembeddings and Displacements. Setting a cultural practice in motion, however, is never simply an act of transfer. Not everything can be extracted from place, and nothing can be extracted unchanged. For a cultural practice to move from one setting to another, it first has to be disembedded from its contexts. At times, goods and practices, set in motion, have carried complex structures of meaning with them. Elements of sacred ritual moved in this way between many of the native peoples of the Americas. Folkloric motifs were transported across local settings. Sacred relics traveled through early Christendom as “portable parcels” of Christianity. Alchemical practices moved across early modern Europe in the company of elaborate meaning systems of metallurgy and cosmology.²²

In other instances, cultural practices were set in motion first by stripping away layers of meaning to leave something sparer and more portable, more mechanical, perhaps, or more abstract. The paring down of missionary teaching to a more easily exportable parcel is a classic example; the rapid circulation of technical information in the modern world is another. Other acts of disembedding work in just the opposite way, by emptying out one set of meanings and reinfusing another. When early European voyagers in the Pacific eagerly plucked up the fauna and flora that were new and exotic to them, shipping them home for cataloging and display, their first act of displacement was their translation of their living cargo into botanical objects. Objects in the European trade with India, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam has shown, were infused with radically novel aesthetic significance in the very act of making their transportation worthwhile. The brass and steel sewing machine arrived in colonial Sri Lanka, Nira Wickramasinghe demonstrates, already elaborately clothed as “modernity.”²³

Are some cultural practices too “sticky,” too firmly set in context, to be disembedded from place? Are others in their nature somehow infinitely malleable, like the graffiti tags that one can find everywhere in the contemporary globe? Do some move as “modules,” kits of pretested practice that can be reassembled anywhere, as Benedict Anderson once suggested was the case of modern nationalism?²⁴ Or is it wiser to think of every movement of cultural practice across space as entailing inescapably an uprooting, a potentially radical disembedding that was, from the first, infused with friction?

Routes and Itineraries. Just as no element of cultural practice moves intact, like a sealed parcel, none moves everywhere. The space through which cultural bits and pieces have moved was defined and routed by tracks that other practices made. New fashions in art and theater were carried along the itineraries of traveling artisans and itinerant production companies. Itinerant musicians, Celia Applegate shows, created the landscape of modern Western music. The labor strike traveled from its

shipboard beginnings, when seamen had “struck” the sails rather than accept a bad bargain for the voyage, across the routes that sailors and, later, the new wage-laboring class voyaged. Captive peoples and coerced laborers carried cultural practices into distant settings. Trade routes, both widely flung and close at hand, were everywhere powerful conduits of cultural practices.²⁵

Routes such as these were constantly under construction—expanding, contracting, and shifting location. But whether the historical reconstruction is of correspondence chains, trade networks, book distribution patterns, itinerant labor routes, or credit relationships, their patterns display both an astonishing extent of connection and striking unevenness. There were places of terrific centripetal force: Paris in the first years of the twentieth century and London in the 1930s were filled, as Susan Pennybacker has shown, by a world of radicals and exiles.²⁶ There are just as striking absences, multiple, nonintersecting networks, and disconnections. Even the oceans, as many scholars have shown, were anything but featureless, watery places. Inscribed by lines of trade and power, the space through which cultural practices moved was never flat but, rather, broken and uneven.

Fields of Contest and Collision. Set in motion along these routes, cultural practices collided with others. At times the result was violent imposition. The cultural projects of empire were saturated with coercion, from the erection of modernity’s new iron cages of race to the hope of pious late-nineteenth-century American reformers to “kill” the cultural Indian within the indigenous Americans. The Inquisition and the *Kulturkampf*, repeated in endless variation, punctuate the history of modernity.²⁷ But still more common were the ways in which each new, traveling cultural practice generated a new arena of contest. This is Partha Chatterjee’s reading of the ways in which the home-rule ambitions of the urban Indian bourgeoisie, rather than opening up as the modular, mail-order tool kit they may have envisioned, precipitated in subaltern India instead a vast and dense new field of struggle.²⁸ The very character of the gifts that the wealthy bestowed on their fellows in late antique Europe, as Peter Brown shows, was a field of contest. Elephants for the urban crowd or alms for the poor? Worlds of politics and cosmology hung on the difference. The American-made material goods that began to pour into Europe in the twentieth century, as Mary Nolan, Victoria de Grazia, and others have shown, set off not only new desires but also new anxieties and intense new rivalries.²⁹

Out of those collisions of cultural practices came, finally, an astonishing variety of new cultural productions. Focused, as their sources often lead them to be, on efforts to police, contain, or resist the intruding cultural forms, historians are still learning to appreciate how generative

these collisions were. Irish and African dance forms, constructed continents apart, met in early-nineteenth-century New York City, as April Masten shows, to create not a new common dance practice but a new space of cultural contest, competition, display, betting, and even (at times) racial cross-identification that was powerfully productive of cultural possibilities. Similarly, zoot suit fashions ricocheted through African American and Latino neighborhoods in the 1940s; reworked designer clothing traveled from Paris to Central Africa; rock music invaded the world and hip-hop has become a field of competition virtually everywhere.³⁰ These instances of contest were not outliers. In churches and music halls, the new moving materials—forms of piety, styles of preaching, virtuosity of performance—sustained a field of ongoing and continuous competition. In Peter Brown’s late antique cities, centuries-long collision zones of classical, Jewish, and Christian practices of justice, gift, and charity, what emerged was an utterly novel social imagination of economy and belonging.

The fields where cultural practices collided, in short, were not merely contact zones: middle grounds of accommodation, compromise, and amalgamation. They were not merely sites of syncretic, functional reintegration; nor fields of fertile cross-pollination; nor occasions where dominant discourses might be disrupted—though they could be all of these. Above all they were sites of assertion, rivalry, and contention, sometimes violent and astonishingly generative.

Translations and Misunderstandings. As cultural practices trespassed into new terrain, as new fields of contest formed, there came not only a suddenly expanded field of possibilities but also the need for translation and the possibilities of radical misunderstandings. Here, too, friction was ubiquitous. Brokers and in-between figures, the *passseurs culturels* who stood between competing worlds of practice, were critically important figures. Translation, in its literal sense, was essential work as well, as Douglas Howland has shown in the incorporation of nineteenth-century liberal ideas into Japan—all the more so because it was necessarily imperfect, contested, and incomplete. Trading languages and pidgins developed everywhere, as Mae Ngai emphasizes, in efforts to fill in the gaps of incomprehension; but they were only partly successful, as she shows, in bridging the distance between competing words and meanings. In these worlds of friction, the struggle for commensurability was part and parcel of the phenomena of displacement.³¹

Sometimes the most potent forms of communication came through misreadings and misunderstandings. “Creative misunderstandings” played a key role in the making of early modern science. They were the bridge-work over which religious conversion often proceeded. They helped shape the anxious core of “mimicry.” At times, an event itself unfolded on a stage so saturated with misreadings that they became a constitutive

part of the event itself. This is William Sewell's frame for what came to be called the fall of the Bastille. In Jocelyn Olcott's work, it helps us see the international gatherings of women's advocates not only as sites for alliances and disputes but also as theaters of translation and mistranslation as a world of feminist practices converged.³²

Power and Structures. Finally, just as cultural practices moved across articulated space, and through the frictions of contest and translation, they moved across articulated relationships of power. Making visible those systems of power is one of the tasks of the new histories of cultures in motion. Imported cultural practices could be profoundly destructive, as the history of indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australasia gives so powerful a witness. They could be used as instruments of coercion and governance, as pawns in class and status rivalry, as entry wedges for the formation of new economies and markets, or as markers of state control. Asymmetries in power were the rule. When missionaries in nineteenth-century China sat for photographs in native dress and Chinese wage laborers put on trousers, there was no simple equivalence in these two, overtly parallel acts. When African or Asian householders began to purchase European-made products or American-made sewing machines as items of domestic display, both local and transnational systems of power came into play. Appropriation of the goods and practices of another could be an act of aggression, of surrender, of subversion, of alliance, or of satire. But it was never a neutral act of exchange.

The systems that put cultural practices in motion, finally, demobilized others within them. The ships and caravans of trade required not only enormous capital accumulation and fixed investments but also elaborate systems of slave and bound labor to make the global circulation of goods possible. The Pacific mining diaspora that Mae Ngai describes and the postslavery systems of global cotton production, whose rise Sven Beckert and Andrew Zimmerman have traced, depended on moving forms of semifree labor. In modern times, cultural practices would be carried by conscript armies and the flotillas of war. The very liberation of aluminum from the ground to become the post-World War II era's facilitator of speed and mobility, Mimi Sheller shows, depended on systems of immobility that limited labor movements in the Caribbean and sought to represent the region as fixed in the past. These structures of immobilization are not always easy to discern. But as in a modern airport, or in the warehouses of a globe-spanning Walmart, motion and structure, systems of cultural interaction and systems of power, have always been all intricately interlinked.³³

Practices, disembeddings, routes, fields of contest, translations, and power: these do not exhaust the possibilities for a still richer and more adequate language for the displacements of culture. But they open poten-

tial avenues and provocations at a time when place and the conventional place-bound identities of historians have both become more problematic than before.

The essays of this volume are offered in a similar spirit: as examples, forays, and experiments in the interpretation of cultures in motion. The volume opens with three rich and suggestive essays on the circulation of cultural practices. In the first of them, “The Challenge Dance,” April Masten looks at the ways in which Irish and African dance forms unexpected converged and collided in the taverns of New York City in the early nineteenth century. The virulent racism of the new nation’s social order hangs over these settings, and Masten does not dismiss it. But racist minstrelsy was not the only phenomenon at work. What she shows, rather, is a cultural space and moment in which working-class blacks and whites saw enough likeness in their dance traditions to frame a space of public, popular competition: fierce in its intensity and fiercely productive of new cultural forms. In these licks and flings, in the hammering of these feet on a sounding shingle, in the dancers’ stolen moves and the betting crowds she shows us, graphically, cultures in motion.

Across the continent of Europe, too, music was made in travel. Celia Applegate’s “Musical Itinerancy in a World of Nations” probes a different world of cultural motion: that of the traveling musicians who produced European musical culture and haunted its literary imagination. Disparaged often as rootless musical peddlers, traveling performers carted new musical styles, forms, and techniques between local musical settings. By the end of the nineteenth century monstrously large choral festivals drew professionals and amateurs by the thousands. Out of all of this came new fields of rivalry and new forms of identity (even Brahms registered himself in his summer village as an “itinerant musician”), but also, she shows, the lineaments of a new German cultural nationalism, etched by these travels on the European landscape.

In the last essay in this section, “From *Patriae Amator* to *Amator Pauperum* and Back Again,” Peter Brown explores the ways in which classical, Christian, and Jewish practices of public-spirited gifts, justice, and civic charity swirled together in the cities of late-antique Europe. Gift giving was a continuing obligation throughout these centuries; donation was part of the obligations of wealth. But over time, the forms and recipients of gift-giving practices changed dramatically. The poor displaced the citizenry; the horizons of charity expanded out beyond the locality; its social terms grew bleaker even as its spirit grew more exalted. In these shifting practices, Brown shows, new forms of “pastoral” power came into being. More than that, a classical form of social imagination was displaced by an understanding of wealth, poverty, and society that heralded the beginnings of Western modernity.

The next section turns to “itineraries of matter,” as Pamela Smith calls it: to objects as traveling carriers of cultural practice and meaning. Smith’s essay, “Knowledge in Motion,” opens by plunging us into the heat and dangers of vermilion production in early modern Europe: the hours of firing, stirring, stoking, hammering, chemical manipulation, and anxious waiting, out of which came the red pigment so valued by painters and illuminators to bring blood to life. It was dangerous and exacting, like many artisanal practices, and the friction and resistance of materials were built into it. And yet the techniques of vermilion production traveled rapidly across early modern Europe (and beyond) together with the webs of interlinked homologies—an entourage of lizards, blood, gold, alchemical formulas, and vernacular knowledge—which formed, from matter and artisan labor up, the foundations of early modern science. Arabic texts and Aztec glass figure, too, in the global span of Smith’s essay, as practices and ideas literally swirled through the early modern world.

Nira Wickramasinghe’s “Fashioning a Market” turns the focus to an iconic object in the global commerce of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The American-made Singer machine was not only an early case of mass production for a global market, but one of the first cases in which a corporation tried to standardize the very sale and meaning of its products around the world. The sewing machine instantiated modernity, or tried to. Wickramasinghe’s essay explores the success but also the deflections of that process, as colonial Sri Lankans incorporated the Singer machine into their society and culture. The sewing machine altered gender and commercial practices. It introduced a new market imaginary. But it also created a new field of contest over the very meaning of time and the multiple possibilities of modernity itself.

Mimi Sheller’s exploration of the production and marketing of aluminum as a carrier of uneven global modernities drills down to the ways in which mobility and immobilization were simultaneously produced in the world of traveling commodities, transport systems, and tourism. Aluminum, the “speed metal,” was packaged from the first as a perfectly liquid product whose gleaming surface would carry humans into a bold new frictionless era. Aluminum streamlined the world, even as it fed into infrastructures of transport, electrical power, labor, and communication. The very processes of its production were rooted in producing place, especially in the Caribbean where Alcoa and Alcan mined bauxite, transshipped alumina, and, surprisingly, also brought tourists on cruises through the region. Following the Aluminum Corporation of America’s attempts to bridge the symbolic gap between its raw material sources and its seemingly placeless, modern product, “Speed Metal, Slow Tropics, Cold War” probes the ways in which circulation and structure were not only intertwined in these itineraries of matters but radically dependent on each other.

Our third section turns to the friction of translation and mistranslation across the contact zones of cultural difference. In “The True Story of Ah Jake,” Mae Ngai takes us into a familiar site of cross-cultural tension: the gold fields of nineteenth-century California, where wealth hunger, violence, and escalating racist tension among Chinese, Anglo, and Mexican laborers seared the social landscape of the Pacific slope. All of these haunted the trial of the placer mine laborer Ah Jake. But behind a story of botched justice, Ngai shows us more: a traveling set of labor and social practices carried by Chinese workers across the nineteenth-century Chinese mining diaspora, the competing practices of justice that swirled around each other in the courtroom like rivers of fog, and, most importantly, the struggle to create a trading language between those cultures, a pidgin through which their incommensurability could be partially overcome. The truth of Ah Jake’s story turns out to lie not in his guilt or innocence, Ngai suggests, but in taking seriously the frictions of translation into which he found himself flung.

The stakes in Harold Cook’s “Creative Misunderstandings” were different, but they were no less serious. Sensing the “pulse” of an ailing person went back deep into the pasts of both European and Chinese medical practices, but on such radically different terms that historians of science and medicine have set them apart as independent developments. To sense the *mo* and to palpitate the pulse were wholly different ventures. Sir John Floyer, the British inventor of a “pulse watch” accurate enough to quantify and arithmeticize pulse counting, might be imagined only to have widened that disconnection. But in uncovering the texts and travels through which observations of Chinese sensing of the *mo* came into the ken of early modern medical innovators like Floyer, Cook shows us a much more arresting and nuanced picture. Following accounts of Chinese medical practices as they move through the writings of Jesuit missionaries and Dutch imperial administrators in Asia, imperfect translation layered upon imperfect translation, Cook shows that “creative misunderstandings” can travel, too, and often just as potently.

In the last essay of this section, the processes of translation spill out on a still more crowded stage. In “Transnational Feminism,” Jocelyn Olcott reads the international women’s year gathering at Mexico City in 1975 not simply as a place of alliance making, as feminists found voice and agenda across the world in the 1970s. It was also, she shows, a stage across which feminists moved with highly different understandings of time, event, and selves, a theater in which the problems of translating these into a common project were thickly present. Even the great confrontation between “first-” and “third-world” feminism that was said to define the conference turns out to have been a misreading. The generative force of the Mexico City gathering for modern global feminism does not

dissolve in Olcott's reading. But she helps us see the conference not only as a struggle for power and unity but as a struggle between these globally gathered feminists for commensurability itself.

We conclude with two brief afterwords, opening out the themes of the volume. Bhavani Raman reminds us that the metaphors of reciprocal exchange that energize histories of the itinerant and the peripatetic must not keep the historian from recognizing the violence that also haunts encounters of culture. Helmut Reimitz, drawing on the work of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, reflects on the culture concept itself and the ways in which it, too, needs to be implicated in the moving practices that this volume explores.

To offer these essays as evidence of the dynamics of traveling cultural practices or the radical porousness of place might seem to suggest a field bound up in abstractions. To the contrary, the gift of these essays is to make these worlds of motion vivid, tangible, and, we hope, unforgettable.