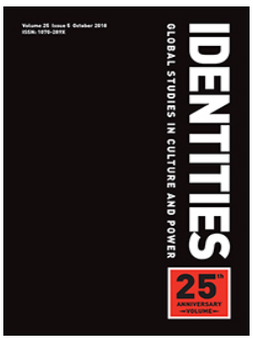

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Connecting and confronting transnationalism: bridging concepts and moving critique

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the trajectory of transnationalism as a perspective and field of study and suggests that new impetus can be given to its development by establishing a dialogue between transnationalism and other key concepts. While the research agenda of the early stages was characterised by a need to distinguish transnationalism from related terms, such as globalisation, we argue that the field could now regain momentum by exploring synergies with other concepts. In this special issue we stage confrontations between transnationalism and, respectively, the (perspectives opened up by the) concepts of 'borders', 'translocality', 'precarity', 'queer', 'moralities', 'the state', and 'brokerage'. Conceptually, this allows us to go beyond an internal critique that exposes the shortcomings of a transnational perspective, by suggesting novel frameworks and toolkits. Substantively, this issue's articles demonstrate the need to refocus transnational studies' attention to the unevenness, instability and inequality of transnational space.

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KEYWORDS Transnational; translocality; precarity; queer; borders; brokerage; immigrants; moralities; state

Transnationalism as a research agenda

Over the last decades, transnationalism has been on the social science research agenda. Randolph Bourne used the concept of 'trans-national America' to depict immigrants' entry into a new American life as early as 1910 (Bourne 1916, 90–91), much before the ground-breaking publication 'Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and De-territorialized Nation States' by Linda Basch, Nina Glick-Schiller and Christina Szanton Blanc (1994). At the time, transnationalism was used primarily to describe an economic phenomenon, namely the global reorganization of the production process, portraying it as an inexorable structural-economic transformation beyond and outside human practices

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and agency. Transnationalism, as defined by Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, referred instead to the 'processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of residence' (1994, 1) and their goal was, according to Glick Schiller (2007a), not to merely describe patterns of living across borders, but to develop social theory that did not use the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis (2007a, 17). The rising awareness of the spatial and cultural interconnectedness of people, cultural forms and objects as well as economic processes, which Glick Schiller and her colleagues spearheaded, have impelled researchers from different disciplines to rethink their perspectives and agendas of research. As Waldinger (2013) rightly points out, transnationalism became a conceptual milestone in the social sciences in general and migration studies in particular. The journal *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, which was founded by Glick Schiller in 1992, and which she edited until 2001, was seminal in carrying out the interdisciplinary research programme inaugurated by the concept of transnationalism, from the moment of the journal's inception to the present day.

Currently, however, transnationalism's research agenda seems to be in a deadlock with little theoretical progress and dynamism since its successful proliferation in the 1990s (Boccagni 2012, 117). After challenging the status quo of many disciplines, transnationalism as a concept is currently at risk of degenerating into a 'catch-all and say nothing' term (Pries 2008, 3). The broadening of its conceptual scope resulted not only in inflation but also a flattening of the concept, as Bauböck and Faist (2010) stated in the preface of the edited book on 'Transnationalism and Diaspora'. While transnationalism has become an important perspective for describing and analyzing empirical data in migration studies and beyond, this is not translated into further theoretical innovation and conceptual development. Particularly lacking are reflections on disjunctures (Amit 2012, 501) and the kind of cross-borders formations that emerge not just through the movements of people, but as a result of social and political practices, symbolic systems and artefacts, which become visible as interactive economic, political and social transformations on different scales in various arenas (Pries 2008, 44). Taking these critiques as a starting point, the aim of this special issue is not to propose a new definition or develop a more coherent conceptual frame, but instead to synthesize transnationalism with other concepts to offer new frameworks for analyzing the complexity and the interconnectedness of social life on a global scale. Such frameworks are particularly important in times when, despite increased mobility and global interdependence, borders, national sovereignty and security are returning as topics of concern not only in politics and the public sphere, but also in research (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, 184).

Despite the fact that the concept became very popular it was not only embraced, but also hotly debated, especially in the 1990s. The term was criticized for 'just' replacing globalization and internationalization, thereby deliberately overlooking power relations between social groupings, the role of the political, especially nation states (Pries 2008), and the conflicts on different levels and between different actors caused by transnational mobility (Koser 2007). Arguments were put forward that transnationalism is not a unique feature of our times, that historical records and processes were not taken into account and that the focus, especially in migration studies, on human mobilities camouflages the global political system of nation-states controlling the movement of people (Salazar and Smart 2011, iii; Kivisto 2001). Others disapproved of the widespread representations and celebrations of transnational actors or practices as framed in a dialectic opposition as well as resistance to the dominant logic of multinational capital or as a sign of the decline of the modern nation states (Smith and Guarnizo 1998, 5). Primarily the unspecific usage of the term and the overgeneralizing discourse – due also to the lack of empirical 'grounding' – received substantial criticism (Vertovec 1999). This critique was linked to the concern about the absence of appropriate definitions of units of analysis and units of references for transnational phenomena and studies (Pries 2007, 3).

Some authors argued in response to this critique that transnationalism is primarily a theoretical lens and that therefore only a broad and elastic concept would capture the rise of mobility and migration movements and the new social formations and networks constituted by information and communication technologies (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Faist 2004; Smith and Guarnizo 1998). Others – particularly but not exclusively in migration studies – proposed that transnationalism refers to sets of empirical phenomena that need to be classified with regard to different levels and forms. The most prominent distinction was made by Smith and Guarnizo (1998) who distinguished between 'transnationalism from above' and 'transnationalism from below' (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999). In their seminal article 'The Study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promise of an Emergent Research Field', Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt (1999) introduce a set of criteria with the aim to delineate more precisely what transnationalism refers to in order to both nourish and 'protect' the field. These criteria include establishing the existence, extent and novelty of transnational activities; delimiting it to exclude phenomena that can already be captured by existing terms; clarifying the unit of analysis; establishing typologies of different expressions of transnationalism; and analysing its conditions (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999). Others, like Itzigsohn et al. (1999), classified continuous and institutionalized transnational activities as 'narrow transnationalism' and material and symbolic practices which involve only sporadic physical movement and a low level of institutionalisation as 'broad

transnationalism'. Glick Schiller (2003) proposed to distinguish between transnational 'ways of being', the taken for granted everyday practices and social relations and transnational ways of 'ways of belonging', the conscious ways in which loyalties are expressed by migrants as well as non-migrants. We regard these interventions, as well as Vertovec's (1999, 2004) dimensions or domains of transformation encompassing economy, politics, culture and religion and Faist's typology of formations of transnational practices leading to different transnational social spaces (2000), as attempts to express and to establish both the breadth and depth of the field.

Transnationalism as a key intervention in social research

To the extent that transnationalism has now become an established field of study, which created a rich space for social scientists and inspired a wide range of studies as well as special issues, these early efforts, characterised by both enthusiasm and temperance, expansion and clear demarcation, can be judged as successful. Importantly, the transnational perspective offered a critique of migration studies' positivist approach and the prevalent methodological nationalism that took the nation-state as the self-evident unit of analysis (Bailey 2001; Levitt 2012; Barglowski, Bilecen, and Amelina 2014). It has opened up a new research field of practices, movements and spaces, which spanned across more than one nation-state. While mostly linked to the combination of two nation-states – those conventionally described as country of origin and host country or residence of migrant populations – following a broader definition, transnationalism captures the 'multiple ties and interactions linking people, organisations or institutions across the borders of nation-states' (Vertovec 1999, 447; Pries 2007, 16). Transnational approaches, perspectives or lenses (although diverse and heterogeneous), revealed that social, symbolic, political, and economic ties exist between migrants' host countries and countries of origin, thus constituting transnational social spaces. A range of studies have been conducted analyzing the networks and organizations of migrants, which cross borders (Faist 2004), the practices of migrants leading to the constitution of transnational spaces (see for example Smith and Guarnizo 1998), the economic and political role migrant communities or diasporas play in their countries of origin, and studies analyzing the efforts of national governments to be responsive to their migrant communities abroad (see for example Basch et al., 1994). They furthermore showed that transnationalism does not only apply to migrant actors, but encompasses wider social, political and economic processes and other actors involved (Levitt 2001). Each of these studies, as Dahinden rightly argued in a recent appraisal of transnationalism, thus 'contributed to different fields of social theory that go beyond mere description of social realities' (2017, 1483) and thus can construct social theories that elucidate

the mutual constitution of the global, national and local (Glick Schiller 2007a).

But transnationalism also spoke to the imagination of scholars who sought to make sense of changing configurations in a different way, namely those who were concerned by the increasing securitisation and politicisation of international migration. For them, it allowed a shift from a focus on the 'why' of migration, to the changes of social and political life through migration. Some very productive interventions have introduced conceptual and methodological innovations, which had the capacity to impact the social sciences more broadly, such as 'transnational social spaces' (Glick Schiller 1997a), offering an arena for investigating the agency of collectivities without losing sight of the economic and political constraints (Goldring 1999, 162) or the rethinking of spatially bounded concepts like community or social categories like the immigrant (Smith 1994). Taking stock today, we can find a voluminous body of transnational studies conducted in different disciplines, focusing on various processes, events and phenomena, such as cross border ties and relationships, identities, citizenship, practices, gender and sexuality or new social formations and a variety of sites and scales (cf. various publications in *Identities*, i.e. Gopalkrishnan and Babacan 2007; Brijnath 2009; Dalum Berg and Rodriquez 2013; Reynolds and Zontini 2016). The concept of transnationalism, or 'a transnational perspective' respectively 'transnationality' as some prefer to call it to avoid the connotation of an ideology (Faist 2014), has thus been a key intervention in social research.

Transnationalism in dialogue

Following the first phase of the 'the discovery of migrant transnationalism' and the second phase of critique that sought to delineate the precise focus and use of the concept (Dahinden 2017, 1475), we have now entered a third phase of transnational studies. More recent work has focussed on bringing transnationalism in dialogue with other fields of study. The special issue in the *Journal of Ethnic Migration Studies* on transnationalism and identity, edited by Steven Vertovec (2001) is an early example of this. More recent examples include the work on transnationalism and diaspora (Brettell 2006) and transnationalism and gender (Pessar and Mahler 2003; Erel and Lutz 2012). Recently, scholars have tried to 'interrogat[e] the concept of integration from a transnational perspective' (Erdal 2013, 983; Erdal and Oeppen 2013; Mügge 2016). This is a particularly interesting move as transnationalism was partly introduced to overcome the national focus of studies of integration and assimilation, and earlier research has looked at the contentious relation between integration and transnational practices by investigating whether 'more' transnationalism meant 'less' integration. Another example of confronting transnationalism with other concepts is the

productive exchange that Thomas Faist (2014) has recently set up between a transnational perspective and the study of social inequalities. These are signs that the accomplished project of the demarcation of a transnational field of studies, where the merit of the concept of transnationality had to be established by careful *isolation* from already existing concepts, now inaugurates a new phase of *synthesis, dialogue* and/or *confrontation* with other concepts and fields. This implies centring transnationalism without decentring other concepts. Put differently, the maturing of transnationalism as social theory, now means that transnationalism/transnationality is a perspective that related fields – such as diaspora and border studies – cannot ignore and must situate themselves in relation to. This mirrors the early phases of transnationalism's positioning in relation to, for instance, the study of globalisation.

This special issue seeks to contribute to this more recent development in transnational research and at the same expand its scope beyond a focus on one concept, perspective or field. In this issue we therefore assemble articles that connect several key social science concepts and discourses with transnationalism. Each of the contributions thereby synthesises two different fields of study, and offers a conceptual, and in some cases empirical, investigation of how this synthesis encourages a rethinking of both the transnational and the respective field it is put in dialogue with. This special issue offers an exchange between transnationalism and the following seven key concepts or fields: 'moralities'; 'queer'; 'translocality; 'precarity'; 'the state'; 'borders'; and, 'brokerage'. Some of these concepts, such as borders, translocality and even the state, share clear affinity with the transnational, whereas the relation of other concepts, such as moralities, precarity, queer and brokerage have to transnationalism is less self-evident. As the authors who contributed to this special issue show, both categories of concepts are, however, the basis of fruitful and innovative exchange.

The special issue thereby gives the now well-established transnational field new impetus by pointing to new avenues of exploration. It invites scholars who have thus far not engaged with transnationalism to consider how a transnational perspective broadens their conceptual horizons, while at the same time encouraging scholars of transnationalism to step outside of the confines of their field. It also responds to the risk of isolation that the by now successful establishment of a field of transnational studies could carry, by following an explicit agenda of integration, connection and confrontation of different concepts and discourses, which have responded to and identified new issues and developments. Furthermore, we seek to move beyond mere critique, by offering alternative and complementary conceptual toolkits. The collected contributions to this special issue demonstrate the potential breadth of the transnational research programme and its interdisciplinary appeal, drawing on anthropology, political science, history,

sociology, African and cultural studies. The dialogues that this special issue presents, finally acknowledge the parallel efforts of some other 'new' approaches and concepts, such as 'queer' and 'precarity', which, similar to transnationalism, have sought to decentralize the mainstream discussions in their respective fields.

Insights from conversations and confrontations

In their article 'Transnational Moralities: The politics of ir/responsibility of and against the EU border', Gerhild Perl and Sabine Strasser engage with one of the most pressing issues of our times, namely the crisis of solidarity that refugees are confronted with, especially in Europe. Taking the representations of and responses to the death of Alan Kurdi, the boy washed ashore in Turkey in September 2015, as a starting point for their analysis, they follow the waxing and waning of moralities and solidarities in the face of the EU border regime. They juxtapose the various forms of outcry following Kurdi's mediatised death and the temporary creation of transnational moral communities with the silence regarding other equally precious lives and hardships. Most importantly, by casting a transnational lens on moralities, they do not only decentre Europe, but also demonstrate that these fleeting responsibilising acts need to be understood as embedded in a political regime of organised irresponsibility. They focus not on the transnational dimension of migrant practices, but instead on the transnational flow of images and moralities in the context of border regimes, reminding us again that a transnational perspective can be productive for migration studies in more than just one way.

Christine Klapeer and Pia Laskar, whose article 'Transnational Ways of Belonging and Queer Ways of Being: Exploring Transnationalism through the Trajectories of the Rainbow Flag', stages an encounter between the concepts 'transnational' and 'queer', similarly explicitly move beyond the already trotted path of studying queer bodies crossing borders in different geopolitical contexts. Instead, they investigate the resonances and tensions between 'queer' and 'transnationalism' as categories of (non-)belonging and transgression. The point of departure for this creative dialogue is the travelling symbol (and floating signifier) of the rainbow flag, which they read through Schiller and Levitt's interpretative framework of transnational 'ways of being' and 'ways of belonging' (2004). The article thereby manages to provide theoretical and conceptual depth to the exchange between transnational migration research, critical sexuality studies and queer scholarship. Klapeer and Laskar trace the everyday acts and performances of transnational modes of being and belonging to show that transnational queer social fields remain heterogeneous, pointing to its potential and

possibilities, while warning against a celebratory accounts of transnational queer communities.

Their emphasis that the transnational must be read in conjunction with the local is echoed by Birgit Englert in her article 'Looking through two lenses: reflections on transnational and translocal dimensions in Marseille-based popular music relating to the Comoros'. In her contribution she combines the concept of the transnational with 'translocality' and shows that an analysis of diasporic artistic practice, in her case popular music performed by the rapper *Soprano* and the group *Afropa* would be impoverished by *a priori* decisions to employ either a translocal or a transnational lens. The discussion of the different careers and the different reception of the oeuvres of *Soprano* and *Afropa*, who are both based in Marseille and share the relation to the Indian Ocean archipelago Comoros, can only be analyzed and understood by referring to both perspectives since there are multiple entry points and pathways of local and transnational incorporation and positioning. The importance of a bifocal – transnational and translocal – lense is thereby highlighted against tendencies to either pitch the two against one another or subsume the one under the other concept.

In the article 'Forced Transnationalism and Labour Migration: Implications for Understanding Migrant Rights', Nicola Piper and Matt Withers return to the subject of the migrant, but explicitly reject the prevalent emphasis on (the celebration of) migrant agency. By bringing together the notion of 'precarity' with 'transnationalism', they propose the new concept of 'forced transnationalism' to focus attention on how political regulatory frameworks produce specific forms of transnational labor practices, which should not be heralded as emancipatory or progressive. Instead, they show that transnational movements and subjectivities are enforced by the imposition of migrant subjectivity as 'agents of development' and ongoing politico-economic crisis in countries of origin. While focusing their analysis on intra-Asian labor migration, they identify new global trends in the organization of precarious labor as well as in the ways in which workers organize transnationally to fight for decent work. Piper and Withers thereby firmly link the social dimension of transnationalism with legal, economic and political arrangements.

The historical materialist structural analysis of Chris Hesketh in his article 'Lost in Space? Putting the Transnational State in its Place' follows a similar line by focusing on political and economic transnational space. He argues that the current global political-economic order with its capital flows is not simply characterized by a transition from the nation-state to a transnational state. While the transnationalism literature inevitably wrestled with the nation-state, especially in its efforts to move beyond methodological nationalism, it has mostly done so 'negatively', i.e. by approaching it as a too rigid container. Instead, Hesketh returns to state theory, especially Antonio

Gramsci's, in order to interrogate new capitalist spatialities and to demonstrate that these cannot be fully captured by a transnational state thesis. The state remains an important locus of geopolitical struggle, and subaltern struggles continue to inform the character of states owing to the necessity of their incorporation.

In 'Border Dispositif and Border Effects: Exploring the Nexus between Transnationalism and Border Studies', Boris Nieswand also reminds his readers that the foundational studies of transnationalism engaged seriously with nationalism and the nation-state rather than predicting its demise, as some misreadings suggest. Departing from this reminder as well as from the observations that borders are rarely explicitly theorized in the field of transnational migration studies and that transnationalism is often missing in border studies, he proposes that border studies can productively contribute to studies of transnationalism while transnationalism can enrich border studies, especially with regard to patterns of global inequalities. In particular, Nieswand introduces the two concepts of 'border *dispositifs*' and 'border effects'; the first serves to de-reify the border as material line of separation and instead alert us to the selecting and hierarchizing of migrants, while the second reifies the notion of border in order to capture the structural effects which border regimes have on transnational migrants' lives. He argues that differential border capital, that is the tensions and paradoxes inherent in migrants' modes of status and class attainment, are particularly suited to detecting border effects. Both concepts, as the empirical data reveals, offer interesting and innovative pathways to synthesise border studies and transnationalism.

Finally, in 'Brokerage and Transnationalism: Present and Past Intermediaries, Social Mobility, and Mixed Loyalties', Sara de Jong argues that the emphasis on the relative newness of transnational practices and their connection with technologies of communication and travel, characteristic of the early phase of transnational scholarship, has prevented transnational scholarship from studying the parallels between contemporary transnational agents and their historical precursors. She proposes to set up a dialogue between studies of contemporary transnational activities and ethnohistorical studies on so-called cultural brokers, the go-betweens mediating the unequal encounters between indigenous and colonial/settler communities, to bring into sharper relief the dynamics produced by border/boundary crossing. The article suggests that this helps to identify three converging areas of concern, namely the market for cross-boundary mediators, their opportunities for social mobility and concerns about mixed loyalties, which emerge across a wide range of studies on transnational actors, but which so far have not been systematically recognized. Each of these aspects also highlights the dynamic interplay between on the one hand the

surveillance of state boundaries and social borders, and on the other hand, their porosity.

A special issue should, ideally, be more than a sum of its parts. The connective work of each of the articles gives new impulse to the field of transnational studies and demonstrates the remaining value of transnational perspectives to uncover relationships and linkages between locations, artefacts and actors. We further argue that the articles collected in this special issue together expose the uneven, instable and unequal nature of transnational social fields and the power structures that shape them. For instance, whereas waving the rainbow flag to mark belonging to a transnational community could in some locations be co-opted by capital as a consumer good or become part of a homonationalist agenda, in other locations it could potentially be sanctioned with serious punishments, as Klapeer and Laskar show. Or, following Englert's analysis of musicians in France with links to the Comoros, transnational and translocal inflections of authenticity, belonging and representation make one rapper successful while another group's music fails to play to popular registers. De Jong also alerts us to the relations of power structuring transnational interactions by tracing parallel dynamics between contemporary transnational agents and cultural brokers in colonial and settler empires who navigated a profoundly unequal terrain and whose acts of mediation cannot be considered separately from the power relations of colonialism.

Attention to the unequal power relations that operate within and across transnational fields is not a new insight altogether. In 'The Situation of Transnational Studies', Glick Schiller already finds 'evidence of the connections between transnational processes and the situated inequalities of power, power located within the structures of gender, states, international organizations, and the organization and deployment of capital' (1997b, 164). However, we argue that subsequent developments in transnational studies, especially the flurry of empirical case studies, have underplayed the unevenness, instability and inequality of transnational space. As Glick Schiller has pointed out, 'transnational research can generate its own blind spots […]. Discussion of the balancing acts that migrants stage through simultaneous incorporation can deter us from examining the tremendous and growing imbalance between concentrations of wealth and poverty' (2007b, 464). Her plea to connect transnational scholarship with analysis of neo-imperial structures and 'examine the reconfiguration of power in the world structured by a neoliberal agenda backed by the US military' finds an answer in Hesketh's contribution to this special issue, which places subaltern struggles in the context of unequal capitalist relations. Piper and Withers also follow her battlecry to 'think beyond transnational studies' (2007b, 465) by linking transnationalism to studies of precarity and decent work, in order to highlight the structures that underpin precarious experiences of forced

transnationalism. Nieswand's and Perl and Strasser's contributions both recognise the necessity to 'develop an analysis of the fields of uneven power within which the networks [transnational scholars] trace are constituted' (Glick Schiller 2005, 455), the first by connecting transnational mobility with bordering practices, the latter by tracing the unequal distribution of global ir/responsibilities.

Hence, this special issue offers a productive double move to the wider scholarship on transnationalism. On the one hand, we argue for a return to a foundational principle of transnationalism, that is, its embeddedness in unequal structures of capital and relations of power. On the other, we suggest a distinct and innovative route to re-assert the significance of power structures and relations, namely by way of synthesis and confrontation with a range of other concepts and fields. The collection of articles in this special issue thereby give renewed momentum to transnational studies and equip transnational scholars with new tools to address the transnational challenges of our times.

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