

MEASURING THE WORLD

Preface

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Daniel Kehlmann's international bestseller *Die Vermessung der Welt* (2005; *Measuring the World*, 2007) narrates the quest for knowledge through the lives of two giants of the nineteenth century: the botanist and geographer Alexander von Humboldt, and the mathematician and physicist Carl Friedrich Gauss. Gauss's travels are in a virtual space. His passion for exactitude draws him to work on the law of quadratic reciprocity and the frequency of prime numbers: "At the base of physics were rules, at the base of rules there were laws, at the base of laws there were numbers" (Kehlmann 73). Humboldt's quest for scientific knowledge would take him to the geographical "new" world. With permission from the offices of the Spanish colonial regime in Madrid, in 1799 Humboldt arrives in New Amsterdam, Trinidad, to begin what will be recorded in history as one of the most important explorations of all times. Soon after his arrival, Humboldt visits a Christian mission, set up to baptize the natives. The monks cannot figure out what Humboldt and his companion Bonpland want of them; the abbot expresses his suspicion thusly: "nobody traveled half way around the world to measure land that didn't even belong to him" (Kehlmann 58).

Measuring the World captures a historical turning point, when European acquisition of knowledge about the world is undergoing a drastic change. The idea of the "New World," in its history and contemporaneity, becomes an object of fascination and exploration. What is new is the privileging of a different kind of travel narrative that was not merely about impressions but about knowledge: evaluated, tested, and scientifically "exact" knowledge. The world, be it in its metaphysical, epistemological, ontological, or physical form, was now being accessed through scientific treatises, documents, maps, etc. New developments in sciences and technology—John Campbell's invention of the sextant (1757), Frederick König's improvement on the printing press (1810), and George Stephenson's design of the first locomotive (1814)—exemplify the vital energy that characterized the dawn of a speedier age. The

launching of several encyclopedias—Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* (1751), *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1768, which expanded to 20 volumes by 1810), Löbel and Franke’s *Conversations-Lexicon* (1796, which became the *Brockhaus Enzyklopedie* in 1808)—were part of the collection, collation, classification and organization of knowledge about the world. In other words, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, textual knowledge becomes key to grasping a world beyond one’s physical reach. Accessibility to the world was not merely a function of travel; the world was fast becoming accessible *in print*.

It would be a fallacy indeed to assume that the growth of knowledge and the support to quench the curiosity about the world happened in a vacuum. The growing trade between Asian and European nations gave birth to the idea of world trade (*Welthandel*) and a world market (*Weltmarkt*) to designate international exchange of goods and international traffic of capital. This growing mercantilism, which led eventually to the establishment of colonial regimes, facilitated access to geographical and historical knowledge about distant parts of the world. Added to this was the growing sense of comparative world history. Leading intellectuals and thinkers, especially in Germany, such as Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottfried Herder, and G.W. Hegel, were all developing their own modalities of *Weltgeschichte* (world history). It is also in this transformative moment that works of literature, especially from European colonies in Asia and Latin America, start making their way into the European literary space and come to be known under the rubric of *Weltliteratur* (world literature), most notably discussed by Goethe (1827) and Marx and Engels (1848).

The need to reflect on Germany’s role in determining the parameters for how one measures the world has recently attracted the attention of artists and historians. Perhaps the richest resource for exploring the numerous layers of venturing to measure the world can be found in the history of museums and their centrality during the nineteenth century in the early formation of the *Bildungsbürgertum*. Museums provide a wealth of evidence about how one conceptualizes various measurements of the world by showing us not only what types of artifacts are privileged for collection and selected for display, but also how their manner of exhibition conveys the hierarchical systems to which they are classified. As the recent exhibit *Vermessung der Welt: Heterotopien und Wissensräume in der Kunst* (2011) so stunningly reveals, the fusion of art and science that goes into the curation of exhibits can be a powerful source of reflection for artists to contemplate the very aesthetics of measurement, classification, and control of knowledge. Frank Trommler’s *Kulturmacht ohne Kompass: Deutsche auswärtige Kulturbeziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert* (2014), an exhaustive study of Germany’s manipulation of culture as a tool of soft power in the twentieth century, further unveils the complex interactions and contradictions of German culture, diplomacy, imperialism, and war throughout the most tumultuous period of

Germany's struggles with negotiating its position in the world. Yet the German preoccupation with measuring the world had a much longer history, as we know, and lay at the core of establishing methods for gathering and processing knowledge of the world at critical moments in German history, transforming the arts and sciences from inward-looking to outward-looking phenomena, and devising effective means of transmitting the outcomes of these processes to the rest of the world. The term *Weltanschauung* is perhaps the best-known German term to achieve status as a "household word." Yet the term itself and its origins encapsulate a myriad of complexities surrounding German self-identification, political history, and cultural mission.

Continually invoking ideals of the organic, the universal, and the global, Germany assumed a central international role in steering literary, artistic, and intellectual activities and discourses. It is highly likely, however, that this unique position arises from the tension caused by continually charting Germany's own national and international courses simultaneously. Notorious for its regional peculiarities and disunity, Germany lagged behind its neighbors in achieving political unification, economic development, and world dominance. However, this very fragmentation on the one hand, and lack of political power over distant geographies through colonialism on the other, created fertile conditions for devising new concepts, structures, and modes of comparing worlds. From the eighteenth century onward, German intellectuals engaged energetically in establishing German identity through the common bond of written language, cultivating literacy, developing arts criticism, and leading the West as a center of book culture, museum culture, humanities, and social sciences within and beyond the ivory tower. Unity, organicism, and universality came to preoccupy German statesmen and intellectuals precisely because these were as elusive and abstract as Germanness itself.

Yet all of these activities also bore the markings of a concurrent interest in situating Germany as a world player. Nationally inspired projects to unify artistic and literary movements, such as the ideal of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, became part of a wider agenda to establish models for the rest of the world. A proactive investment in the sciences; in the production and circulation of knowledge; in the collection, adaptation, and purported "improvement" of foreign artistic achievements (especially in the notion of "German music" as an adaptation and improvement of foreign styles); and in the access to knowledge through translations from other languages led to an unprecedented interest in comparison, leading to the establishment of comparative literature, comparative religions, comparative linguistics, comparative musicology. German cultural critics, historians, and statesmen started to think globally through their increased attention to colonialism, world markets, world history, world families of language, and world literature.

Despite defeats in global conflicts, Germany's "place in the sun" was being colonized on cultural turf. Even after the zeal for national unity and world dominance proved catastrophic in the twentieth century, German ini-

tatives since World War II have continued to exploit the cultural sphere to regain international stature and respectability, demonstrating leadership in the centralization and dissemination of world literature, music, art, and cultural literacy. In a post-Berlin Wall world, a unified Germany has struggled with its internal political organization, while at the same becoming a financial and political leader in the transnational political organization of the European Union and beyond. Just as the Deutsche Bank's role as a prime venture capitalist from the Bay area to Bangaluru to Beijing promotes an economic mapping of the world through the trans-border flow of global capital, so does the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek's leading position in conceptualizing the European Digital Library for a worldwide readership promote a universal mapping of a *Weltanschauung*. In other words, the tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, universalism and particularism has informed, shaped, perturbed, and in many ways even enriched German perspectives on measuring the world.

Measuring through comparison and contrast is and has always been a way of relating to the world. As the historian Sebastian Conrad succinctly observes in *What is Global History?* (2016), modalities of world histories developed in the nineteenth century “were a result of global hierarchies and asymmetrical geopolitical structures” (28). A model of teleological progression of world history that originates in Europe and manifests itself later through adaption in non-European societies can hardly capture our current world order, which is marked by decolonization, migration, and globalization. The seismic shifts of financial and political powers from old centers of the West to new and rising global powers such as China and India cannot sustain a derivative idea of progress and development. Conrad proposes a “relational” model of global history, which underlines that “a historical unit—a civilization, a nation, a family—does not develop in isolation” (65).

In many ways, the essays published in this special issue of *Monatshefte* augment this relational model. Instead of examining the German cultural space in isolation, these essays study “Germany” in relation to other geopolitical units. The authors engage with different incarnations of the tensions between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, as well as between universalism and particularism, both retrospectively and prospectively. Through a relational—rather than an essentialist—comparison, the essays in this collection open up multiple, mutually entangled lines of inquiry.

These essays were first presented at the 47th Wisconsin Workshop, “Measuring the ‘World’: Formation, Transformation and Transmission of the ‘National’ and the ‘Universal’ from the Eighteenth Century to the Present” at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The purpose of the workshop was to conduct an interdisciplinary inquiry of concepts, structures, and terms used widely in literature, music, visual and performing arts, history, political sci-

ence, geography, and sociology, and to locate stations of their growth and development, first within and then beyond Germany. The concepts, structures, and movements the workshop examined were all products of specific historical and cultural moments in German history, when a cosmopolitan orientation to the world was emerging parallel to a focused investment in a cultural organization around the German language, arts, and dissemination of knowledge. The papers, some of which are included here, explored Germany's role as scientific and artistic power-broker and scrutinized the political, cultural, and moral dimensions of the numerous ways the world can be measured, giving rise to the following questions: How was Germany's conceptualization of the world politically charged and historically conditioned? How and why did Germany become a forerunner in the ways of conceptualizing the world? What are the positive and negative legacies of the modes of situating the Self and the Other in German intellectual history? How do historical contingencies and political realities impact the origins and proliferation of conceptual terms and frameworks in transnational contexts?

As the essays in this issue show, measuring the world can be carried out with a wide range of tools and parameters that fix their measurements according to various dimensions. For one thing, the world can be measured by the borders that divide nations, states, and provinces. Cartographers may have the skills to determine precisely where these borders should lie, but the drawing and redrawing of borders arising from world-shattering events can generate deep cultural crises that challenge the permanence as well as the permeability of those borders. Karolina May-Chu's analysis of the "border poetics" of the novel *Katzenberge* focuses on the psychological turmoil that haunts successive generations of a family forced to relocate after World War II. But using borders as guidelines for measuring the world may become obsolete in the global marketplace of the twenty-first century. Randall Halle conducts a multi-media investigation of the roles of architecture, arts, crafts, and especially film in establishing and then dissolving cultural boundaries from the nineteenth century to the present. Evaluating the emergence of "national style" in relation to "transnational style," Halle makes a strong case for the reconsideration of what he calls "inter-national" imaginations of national communities.

The world can also be measured culturally and linguistically, a project that dates back to the early modern period with the European fascination with China but which also revealed the dangers of claiming to understand a distant culture on the basis of a very few artifacts, as Daniel Purdy shows in his essay. The cultural and linguistic measurement of the world took a particular pride of place in German scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and developed much more sophisticated tools for measurement, both by investing in the field of linguistics arising from Germany's limited role as an imperial power, and by pioneering the campaign to establish a category

of world literature. As Lisa Yager demonstrates in her case study of German Southwest Africa, such projects, despite their presumed mission to dissolve borders, devolved into demarcating the differences between the conquering and the conquered. Peter Goßens's analysis of debates on world literature around 1900 reveals how Goethe's ideas on *Weltliteratur* undergo a drastic transformation by the end of the nineteenth century, when the cosmopolitan ambition of world literature is attenuated by the collective narcissism of a German national literature. Through a distinct "othering" of Jewish intellectuals, political boundaries between the insiders and outsiders are clearly drawn, and critiques of world literature acquire a distinct tone of antisemitic rancor.

Along these same lines, measuring the world can also be driven by establishing hierarchical schemes. Population groups have been ranked by vague notions of cultural superiority or by their acquisition of power or wealth, yet as Julie Allen's essay on George Brandes's critique of German power shows, the mistreatment of Danish minorities called into question how one goes about calculating national importance, prestige, and power, as Brandes's harsh assessment of German imperialism across the Danish border ultimately measured German greatness as deficient. Allen's ideas acquire a different dimension in Katherine Robiadek's essay, which stresses that measuring the world also raises questions about how we define the "world," whether through the creation of art, through the acquisition of power and wealth, or through the methods of historicism, a problem that preoccupied thinkers such as Heidegger.

At the end of 2010, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* carried two articles that fronted the political and cultural power of technology in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The cover story, "Enthüllt: Wie Amerika die Welt sieht" ("Uncovered: How America Sees the World"), detailed the political ramifications of worldwide access to U.S. diplomatic cables through Wikileaks. The following article, "Artenvielfalt" ("Diversity of Species"), reported on the gene bank in Gatersleben, a small town near Magdeburg. The photographs accompanying the two articles befittingly elaborate the content of the stories. The cover of the issue carried faces of major international newsmakers of the early twenty-first century: Hamid Karzai, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Nicholas Sarkozy, Silvio Berlusconi, Kim Jong Il, Vladimir Putin, and of course the German chancellor Angela Merkel: the world through mug shots of world leaders, if you will, with each portrait captioned with choicest adjectives for the leader as quoted from Wikileaks. The article on the gene bank, on the other hand, features a picture that shows shelves upon shelves of jars filled with seeds of flora from around the world, carefully labeled and arranged to display, one could argue, another kind of "diversity of species." The caption to this picture reads simply: "Bibliothek des Lebens" ("Library of Life").

If the world is a legible text, the text of the world of the twenty-first century is arguably one in which computer bytes and plant seeds become significant cultural signs. Together these “bytes” and “seeds” provide us with characters and pixels that assist us in imagining a world with a specific manifestation of intellectual and technological spirit, a world where market forces interact with and often collide against cultural institutions, a world where historical realities are media-accessible, and often media-generated.

In the aftermath of the violent political crisis in Syria, hundreds of thousands of Syrian citizens arrived in Germany (Aisch and Almkhatar). The summer and early fall of 2015 brought countless images and stories of a “foreigner-friendly” Germany. International media was replete with pictures of Germans standing at train-stations with placards saying “Foreigners Welcome” in German, English, and even Arabic. Chancellor Angela Merkel—who in fall 2010 declared that the idea of a “Multikulti” German society “had utterly failed” (Evans)—transformed her political stance with an open door policy on immigrants. This led to her recognition as *Time* magazine’s “Person of the Year 2015.”

A closer look at more recent events reveals the differences of opinion that are slowly emerging in German national and European regional politics. The cost of absorbing Germany’s newest migrants has become a major issue for protests and public debates. Nationalist groups are once again expressing concerns about the “rapid decline” of an (ethnic-)German culture (Vox-Europe). Conservatives frequently reference the fact that by December 2014, the number of German residents born outside of Germany had reached a record high of 16.4 Million, a drastic change since 1974, when the number of foreign-born residents of Germany reached 400,000 because of the guest-workers from Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, and the former Yugoslavia (BAMF). The political text of contemporary Germany can only be read relationally and comparatively, not in isolation.

From Gauss and Humboldt to Wikileaks to immigrants, there are many ways of measuring the world. The “world” itself, as we know, is a multivalent signifier, marked by geographical features, political boundaries, cultural specificities, historical processes, and financial realities. Since human existence is marked by, and leaves its indelible mark on, all of these elements, human beings are by nature curious about the world. They reflect upon, bear testimony to, witness, exaggerate, critique, and applaud—in other words, represent and narrate—the world in multiple ways. After all, the best measure of the world is the difference, the heterogeneity, and the multiplicity that can give it a sense of unity in diversity.

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