

Introduction

Unfamiliar Objects, Dialogic Translations

Priyam Goswami Choudhury & Florian Schybilski
University of Potsdam

“But no living word relates to its object in a *singular* way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate.”

(Bakhtin 1981, 276)

I

Where does an object exist? The moment an object, familiar or unfamiliar, crosses the threshold of *not being* and enters the world of a consciousness, collective or individual, it begs to be inserted into a line of thought and discourse in order to be made intelligible. In the Bakhtinian sense of the term, then, translation is always and foremost a kind of tracing the kinds of relationship that exist between words in the first place. The “elastic environment” that defines that arena of relating is where the discourse is born. The word and the object can only exist in that elastic environment of being both the signifier for the word and the discourse that signifies both the word and the object. The penetration of an object into the world in which it starts to exist, either as a word or as a relation, cannot be translated outside this relation. For Walter Benjamin, the task of the translator is to insert these relational configurations between objects and words in a language, not as “reproductions” or by “covering it” to claim upon the original, but as “harmony” where the *intentio* of both versions exists independently (2007, 79). Translators are thus required to reflect upon the “translatedness” of the act of writing. This gives rise to a dialogic understanding of translation foregrounding the necessity to trace and understand the very way in which we relate ourselves to the world via objects.

The present special issue of *Kairos* is born from and couched in this act of dialogic foregrounding. This foregrounding is necessary in the discursive world where concepts, theories, and new objects intersect continually in the humanities, building bridges between different disciplines and struggles for social justice. For, only in asking the right questions would we be able to find the answers that will explicate the world in which we live and the politics that

may change it. When we set out to answer these questions, the question of modernity itself became the mode of our engagement. In the winter of 2020, an initial approach was conceived, which took the form of a polemic: How do we dare translate the modern when, at its core, it is colonial?

This concern became the genesis for a postgraduate conference that took place in autumn of 2021 under the aegis of the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies' aptly titled Post-Graduate Forum "Postcolonial Narrations". In the call for papers, the "elastic environment" of the Bakhtinian notion saw translation along the lines of the "contact zone" conceived by Mary Louise Pratt. As the site of (post)colonial encounter, the notion of the contact zone allows us to conceive of every object within language as 'conscripted' into the productive but also highly political, "tension-filled" environment of discourse (Bakhtin 1986, 276). We reject any racially or culturally purist notions of the contact zone as somehow marked by lack. Instead, we highlight the contact zone's potential as an epistemologically privileged space of interaction, negotiation, and translation. In keeping with David Scott's idea of conscription by/into modernity (2004) and his critique of the romantic mode developed in relation to C.L.R. James's conception of Haitian general and leader of the first successful anticolonial revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture, we suggest that the tragic mode may be a more appropriate way to frame the work of translation. Romanticizing narratives about the conquest of colonial modernity and revolution from within do not hold up to scrutiny but eventually point to the necessity to negotiate the existing racialized power structures that require the subjects to make themselves intelligible within the given regime. English, French, and German as formally imperial languages that dominate the globalizing print market but also other languages laying claim to the status of sole linguistic representatives of nation states such as, for example, Hindi will always already have conscripted the translator into their ideological and aesthetic projects. While this is certainly tragic, it is not to say that such conscription constitutes the end of history. As the examples of Haiti and numerous other formerly colonized states show, conscripts – usually relegated to subaltern positions – do, indeed, have the power to change the status quo even if they cannot eliminate colonial legacies. The politics of translation in the contact zone thus operate not only as linguistic but also as cultural manoeuvres "with bearing on approaches to world literatures, literary world-systems and literary history, the politics of periodization, the translation of philosophy and theory, the relation between sovereign and linguistic borders at the checkpoint" (Apter 2013, 11).

The conference finally came into being as an online-only space under the title "Modernities in the Contact Zone: Translating Across Unfamiliar Objects". Our engagement with this topic – our own acts of thinking, laying these thoughts open and interrogating them together with fellow PhD students – had to take place in physical separation from each other. The irony was not lost upon us as we tried to make the required translation on the material level

to account for the Covidian reality: the necessities and impossibilities resulting from our virtual presence mediated by screens, cameras, and headsets made us painfully aware of the digital contact zone into which we had entered in lieu of the quite literally conventional in-person conference experience. As was the case for many fellow academics, the synergies that came from the conversations in that interstitial zone where we thought through concepts together, gave us reason to pause. After all, as people living in disparate parts of the world during the pandemic, we found the various intersecting large-scale crises to be stark indicators of an unjust world – one where the strain upon resources, unequal access to healthcare, and climate justice is not equally felt by people; but also one where dialogicity is key to realizing our shared imperilment and tackling large-scale crises in the Anthropocene like the climate emergency and the Covid-19 pandemic.

This dialogicity shared by different discourses required to think together in a virtual space became a reality for us in that conference but not without consequences. On the one hand, we could observe that the distinction of work and private life – a binary already deconstructed by most academics' lives – underwent a form of translation as the material conditions had changed for us all. Flats and rooms became unfamiliar objects to those inhabiting them as sections of what had previously come to be conceived of as belonging to the private sphere became public space insofar as living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens were turned into makeshift offices from where participants fed their thoughts and video streams into the digital ether. On the other hand, the decision to take things online was pivotal for enacting shared political convictions and the vision of a more just future within academia. It widened the ambit of our contact zone giving us the chance to open up the space and extend invitations to early-career scholars whose institutions would not have paid for them to travel to a conference in Germany.

Since we exist in the European academic bubble, which structurally finds itself struggling to divest itself of its colonial underbelly, this remained only a very modest step towards manoeuvring us into positions that could be critiqued, interrogated, and shaped by voices that could not have been part of an in-person event. It was an important step nevertheless because it helped create an experience that steered the conference and the present issue away from the dangers of self-congratulatory homophony and closer to a representative polyphony of self-reflexive perspectives. In the age of the neoliberal university, such a space necessarily remains a space in constant translation. Academia urgently needs to reinterpret acts of thinking and producing knowledge themselves as objects in translation – be they products of or remedies to our woes. If we stand “at the threshold of a *moment of arrival*, with theorizations that start with the idea of intellection from the Global South as their premise”, as Dilip Menon has recently argued in the translation project that is *Changing Theory*, then the site of theory itself must reproduce the many

voices that demand a seat at the table (2002, 4). This is where we demand rigorous dialogicity in order to create polyphony in the first place.

As Ridgeway and Purakayastha ask in the opening paragraph of *Kairos*'s last issue of 2022: "How do we approach literature from this perspective of catatonic cognition?" To arrive at the prospect of joint, collaborative political action, we have to overcome "normative catatonia, the ethical paralysis when we are systematically disempowered or desensitized to respond to the evil staring at us" (1). We suggest that the dialogic principle of engaging with every strand of an argument is one way of engaging with the moment of emergency that we inhabit. Only then do we find the emergent in an emergency. Dialogicity was then perhaps the most striking feature of the conference. In the end, it was our saving grace and a mode of thinking – collaboratively, but also thoroughly – that shaped our own approach to this special issue. Our understanding of knowledge production in terms of collaboration, cooperation, and critical exchange lies at the core of the decision to take the project beyond the participants in the original conference and invite other scholars to add to and complicate the picture. At the same time, it was our intention to retain the dialogic format that underpins academic knowledge production in general and is particularly characteristic of conferences.

In the interest of creating such a site of collegial and philosophical polyphony, it was our wish that these contributions would complement and speak to each other in a mode that privileges the formulation "Yes, and ..." over "Yes, but ..." The modest polyphony we have achieved reflects this in different ways: there are contributions that enter into a direct dialogue with the thoughts developed in another paper and try to develop, complicate and add to these particular perspectives as a short critical comment. The act of translating between contexts, taking up Bakhtin again, is that moment where an object that is embedded in an elastic environment of the temporal and the spatial enters the discourse. And seen in this vein, every translation is always necessarily a kind of "failure" – very productively and richly so, we would argue. This is also to underpin the "ethical singularity" of representing an underrepresented context that is evident in the "secret encounter" that exists in every act of translation and its theorization, something that Spivak notes in her Translator's Preface for Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps* (1996, 270-271). The contributions in the present issue speak to each other about notions of translation and reception as well as differently configured "failures" in translating the ghazal as a poetic form into English (Kumar), adapting Brecht on the stage in Calcutta (Roy), consolidation the Indian nation-state in Nagaland (Ningthoujam), imagining the postapocalyptic desert as the space of liberation in a summer blockbuster (Stork), and conceiving of a decolonial German memory politics for the Humboldt Forum (Maricocchi). And yet, in the Benjaminian framework every supposed failure is "only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages" (2007, 75). For, this foreignness in languages is where the door opens for us to enter

other discourses in an elementary sense of taking account of the way these acts of translations enter our daily lives, transforming them in carrying things over within and beyond excesses of meaning.

II

The excess of meaning forms the core of Abiral Kumar's contribution "The Formality of Form: Reading Ghazal as a Contact Zone" where the slippages of meaning within form and content creates the ghazal as a poetic contact zone. This traversal, historically traced from its origins in the Arabic peninsula and further innovations in Persia, is read within the Mughal empire's cultural politics and finally speaks to the more contemporary moment where Aijaz Ahmad and Agha Shahid Ali produce the ghazal in English. Kumar uses the fluidity of the ghazal, the *rawaniyat*, across the contexts to comment on the "near impossibility of translating or reproducing the ghazal in English" but this "failure" is necessary to introduce the novelty of the form in English. In this reading Kumar inserts the form of ghazal as a contact zone that can be read within the flux of literary and cultural traditions, both within the Mughal era and the anglophone context of the 21st century U.S. The difference in the approaches of Aijaz Ahmad and Agha Shahid Ali inspires Kumar's question, whether any translation – especially one with a history as varied as the ghazal – could ever be "real" or "unreal". The possibilities in-between can only exist when being open about what it means to create a "ghazal" in a given context, and what that form's translation into a different context entails. The space of interrogating the friction between Ahmad and Ali enables conceiving of the ghazal as a site of "translation, negotiation, and adaptation".

The problem of adaptation and negotiation finds a more material object in the critical reading of "rupantor" in Souradeep Roy's contribution "Making Brecht UnBrechtian But Is that a Good Thing?: Brechtian Epic as Alienated Melodrama in India". The Nandikar theatre group adapted Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* in 1970s Calcutta, which was criticised as a "vulgarisation" of Brecht. While this is something that could be read as a "failed" adaptation, Roy uses this supposed "failure" as a necessity in order to underpin the "alienated melodrama" that is produced in the Calcutta context. The question of translating, read closely via Walter Benjamin's work on translation and epic theatre, gives us a more rounded view of Ajitesh Bandopadhyay's and Nandikar's self-reflexive theatrical practice that transformed theatrical practices in reaction to the "uneven development of capital." This comparison between Brecht and the Bandopadhyay translation also allows Roy to delve deeper into the need for cultural practices to enter a heteroglossic space, where the alienation cannot mimic Brecht, nor can it place itself into culture via Chinese epic theatre in order to do justice to the act of translating for a different context. As Roy points out by reading the representation of a sex worker within and without the theatre in the material context of Calcutta, the translation must

instead do something else: it must bring a Bengali-speaking public into the theatre and make Brecht useful by creating a “rupantor of melodrama.”

The use of a melodramatic form begs the question of function: what does a text do in being melodramatic, in showing a narrative of the past? In Sainico Ningthoujam’s contribution “Banality of Violence: (Mis)Remembering the Past”, this question is answered in a complicated manner. In her reading of Temsula Ao’s short story “Soaba”, the eponymous protagonist is the embodied form of someone who has been traumatised and brutalised in the border area of Nagaland – the border state being a literal contact zone between disputed borders and contested nationalisms. In her reading of the short story, Ningthoujam uses the concepts of “necropolitics” (via Mbembe) and “slow” and “spectacular” forms of violence (via Rob Nixon) to untangle the politics of indigeneity, modernity, and development in the northeast of India. Ningthoujam argues that even as the short story uses the melodrama of visceral violence to shed light upon the embodied forms of experiencing a contact zone, in reading this as a form of binary, the risk of translating a form of resistance is that one may fall prey to other forms of “remembering” a past that never existed. The question, then, is: can this catachresis of memory politics be a radical form of resilience?

As Michelle Stork’s contribution “‘I Was Taken as a Child. Stolen’: Narrating Automobility, the Stolen Generations and Environmental Justice in *Mad Max: Fury Road*” tells us, the summer blockbuster’s “translation” of characters can do exactly that. Stork works to complicate the codification of characters in *Mad Max: Fury Road* as Indigenous. The essay rejects the knock-out argument based on the racial misalignment between the characters and the actors representing the Vuvalini suggesting the film narrative’s ill success in “translating” Indigeneity in a tenable way. It is superseded by a more in-depth examination of *Fury Road*’s constructed Indigeneity-as-coding. Of particular interest in this investigation is the role of automobility, which is one of the most visible hallmarks of modern petro-patriarchy and acquires tragic meaning in the context of the abduction of Indigenous children known as the Stolen Generations. With its connotations of individualist consumer culture, over-exploitation of natural resources and pollution in various forms, the Indigenous-coded Vuvalini’s practice of automobility allows Stork to “translate” the discourse – or “carry it beyond” – the romanticising, racialising, and thus inherently limiting moral demand of Indigenous people to practice ecological sustainability. Automobility is thus a tool to break with the racializing stereotype of “the Indigenous” as “in perfect harmony with nature”. The gaze is redirected away from actual Indigenous people of whom “authentic” (i.e., stereotypical and tokenised) performance is demanded and back onto *white* assumptions about Indigeneity. This novel way of reading the dystopia of *Mad Max: Fury Road* throws a challenge to environmentally polluting, *white* cultures that depend on these racist tropes to reassure themselves that there is, indeed, a Plan B – that the sustainability-narrative attached to Indigenous communities

will continue to balance the polluters' and over-consumers' own unsustainable practice. As the coalition forming against villain Immortan Joe shows, the responsibility to effect political changes for a more just and inhabitable future cannot simply be passed off to Indigenous communities.

The last section of this issue accommodates a critical engagement with the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. Rita Maricocchi's essay "Translation and Memory in the Humboldt Forum: The Alternative Museum Space in Priya Basil's Film Essay 'Locked In and Out'" reveals the palimpsest of meaning attached to the location of the Humboldt Forum as it has historically served the prince-electors of Brandenburg (a state that traded in enslaved people), Prussian kings (who aspired to formal recognition as an imperial power), and after its demolition in 1950 became the seat of the GDR's parliament in the newly built Palace of the Republic. After German reunification, this symbol of the GDR's legacy was torn down and a reconstruction of the Berlin Palace was erected. Today the reconstructed palace houses the Humboldt Forum and its exhibitions, which were opened to the public in 2021 and have attracted massive criticism for its historical revisionism that builds on notions of a supposed German imperial grandeur and relativizes the legacies of German colonialism and its racist foundations.

It is against this background that Maricocchi enters into conversation with Priya Basil's multi-media essay "Locked In and Out". Maricocchi analyses Basil's translation of the Humboldt Forum across her own biography and positionality within the regime of the nation-state and argues in favour of an alternative museum space with a transnational vision. Drawing on Michael Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory, she investigates how Basil's forensic analysis of German collective memory works to deconstruct the Humboldt Forum's museal practices alongside its claim of autonomous decolonization while keeping an eye on the artist's own implication in this neo-imperial project as a hired critic.

III

As will be apparent to our readers, the contributions in this special issue of *Kairos* cover the ground between a Hollywood summer blockbuster set in a postapocalyptic Australian wasteland and the northeast region of India that is mired in an armed conflict that continues to claim many lives as we put the finishing touches to this introduction. In academia where things are always put "in conversation" without giving the object entering the discursive universe enough space to exist in and of itself as a contextual node in the web of meanings, our attempt has been to reflect upon such discursive objects – whether in literature or in popular culture – as contested spaces. Be it the Brechtian adaptation in 1970s Calcutta or the former imperial palace that has re-emerged as the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, every contestation has been treated in the pages of this issue as marking the entanglements of modernity

that we inhabit in this day and age. It is not our wish or attempt to have the final word on any of these topics. In fact, by presenting every text in this issue with a counter-piece, a comment, or a contextual “partner in crime”, we seek to break open the discursive space and use its elasticity. For, every word or the object it signifies that exists in the world may find it hard to enter the heteroglossia of a world in 2023 – where every tragedy can become a meme and every meme a space of creating resilience – but in-between the translations and the rich polyphony that exists, every entanglement is an opportunity to come to terms with the inalienable web of relations within which we exist.

We would like to express our gratitude to all the contributors, the anonymous reviewers as well as Kathleen Samson and Baldeep Grewal, our colleagues at the University of Potsdam’s Research Training Group *minor cosmopolitanisms*, for their continued support with this project after the initial conference. We are thankful to all the voices who were a part of the conference in 2021, without whom this issue would never have been as rich and productive. We are particularly indebted to the editor-in-chief of *Kairos*, Pavan Malreddy, who has given us as early-career scholars the opportunity to shape this issue on our own terms and who has, with utmost patience, accompanied it from the stages of its infancy to the words that you read on this screen.

Works Cited

- Apter, Emily. 2013. *Against World Literature*. London: Verso.
- Bakhtin, M.M. 1986. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2007. *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Menon, Dilip. ed. 2022. *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1991. “Arts of the Contact Zone.” *Profession*: 33-40.
- Ridgeway and Purakayastha. 2022. “Introduction: Emergency Literature, Emergency Aesthetics.” *Kairos* 7(2): 1-9.
- Scott, David. 2004. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1996. *The Spivak Reader*, edited by Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean. London and New York: Routledge.

Priyam Goswami Choudhury is a Berlin-based lecturer and researcher who teaches at the University of Potsdam. She recently handed in her PhD dissertation that analyzed postcolonial literary histories via publishing practices of DIY magazines and their transnational networks. Currently, her research work focusses on imperial ecologies of Assam tea and material traces of producing culture in the archives. Broadly, her interests include publishing

practices of postcolonial literature, popular culture, poetry, and colonial ecologies.

Florian Schybilski is a PhD student, lecturer and coordinator of the DFG-funded Research Training Group minor cosmopolitanisms at the University of Potsdam, Germany. Florian's dissertation titled 'Dalitisms' complicates the essentializing notion 'Dalitness' in the singular by addressing disparate articulations of Dalit self-affirmation in contemporary, post-liberalization India marked by Brahminical Hindu-nationalism. Given India's neoliberal turn, he uses the lens of consumption as a particularly relevant category of analysis. Florian's wider interest lies with Ambedkar's notion of social democracy and its deployment as a critique of caste-complacent claims unquestioningly valorizing India as "the world's largest democracy".