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Moving Centers & Traveling Cultures: Readings in Contemporary Anglophone Literatures

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> *There is now a world culture, but we had better make sure we understand what this means: not a replication of uniformity but an organization of diversity, an increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures, as well as a development of cultures without a clear anchorage to any one territory. (Hannerz 2002, 102)*
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> *There is no hierarchy of knowledge and aristocracy of aesthetics, only cultures in relation. (wa Ngugi, n.d., 2)*

In January 2018, *Le Monde Afrique* published an article accusing China of having spied on the African Union Headquarters in Addis Ababa, a building financed and constructed in 2012 by the Chinese government (Tilounie and Kadirn, n.p.). As *Le Monde*'s investigation showed, in-house software specialists had discovered inexplicable activity on the organization's servers in the small hours of the night and found out that the data traffic had been diverted: "According to several sources, every night, the secrets of this institution found themselves stored more than 8,000 km from Addis Ababa, on mysterious servers hosted somewhere in Shanghai, the Chinese megacity" (Tilounie and Kadir 2018, n.p., our translation).[1] Further investigation revealed bugs in the headquarters' offices and conference theatre.

Detractors of China's thriving activities on the African continent possibly find their suspicions confirmed. What might be surprising, however, is the way these allegations have been shrugged off by numerous African officials. *Le Monde* quoted an unnamed African diplomat: "It does not matter if the Chinese are listening in. At least they never colonized us, supported the struggles of independence on the continent, and help us economically today" (2018, n.p., our translation).[2] Ruanda's President Paul Kagame appeared equally unfazed: "If the Chinese want to hear what we say, read what we write, or anyone else... I do not think espionage is only a Chinese specialty. We are surrounded by spies everywhere in the world" (*RFI*, n.p, our translation, elision in the original).[3]

The anecdote concerning the African Union Headquarters serves to illuminate that geopolitical events have long moved beyond Eurocentric perspectives and bypass the "world's violent polarization into West and East" (Clifford 1997, 5). These events attest to a decentering of hierarchies and

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reordering of power dynamics in which the old colonial powers appear remarkably marginal, unimportant – even provincialized (Chakravorty 2000). Arguably, Chinese investment in Africa is not unproblematic in itself and requires further analysis, but burgeoning Chinese-African relations challenge the well-established geopolitical hierarchies of Global South and Global North. In Ngugi wa Thiong'o's words, the "narrative of a mainstream versus a colonial periphery" becomes increasingly complicated to uphold (2012, 50). Such transnational events attest to axes of power, influence and dependence which do not conform to 'old' hierarchies between Global North and Global South. Here, the former colonial center finds itself on the margins and is, indeed, not even part of the conversation.

As is often the case, imaginative literature provides a platform for discerning and representing such shifts. In NoViolet Bulwayo's novel *We Need New Names* (2013), for instance, slum-dwelling children also insist on handling African-Chinese relations on their own terms. Visiting a shopping mall under construction by Chinese builders, they quarrel with one of the workers: "Do you want us to come back at night and defecate all over?" (46). In the first half of this novel, local power hierarchies and Afrasian relationships are far more important than the polarity between East and West, or North and South. As this collection of essays will show, this literary anticipation of shifting power relations is no isolated case. What might sound like a truism of the blandest sort actually rings true to the artists and artworks discussed in this essay collection and to the emerging scholars committed to this type of research: Literary fiction, artistic interventions and creative imaginations oftentimes anticipate and foreshadow developments which later become geopolitical realities. Art reflects and explores what motivates individuals, societies, histories and identities, whilst it forms part of their construction. Artists and authors may explore contexts and truths which seem audacious, non-normative, 'against the grain' or simply painful.

The works discussed in this special issue are reflective of the experience of the 21st century: mobility and migration, boundlessness and movement. The seemingly free flow of information and goods shapes the global economy as well as its cultural imaginations. Goethe's "expanded homeland" and McLuhan's "global village" as tokens of the increasing interconnectedness leave behind Europe as their main reference point (cited in wa Thiong'o 2012, 48). The literatures and imaginations pertinent to this journal issue weave intricate networks of various streams and influences from different areas and times, stemming from different peoples. In a sense, the authors and artists discussed here all belong to the "English language cultural universe", but vividly engage in "conversation[s] of languages and other ways of knowing" (wa Thiong'o 2012, 58). Knowledge of the past and present "comes to us in textual form", as Edward Said succinctly puts it, and societies are created through their representation (cited in Auerbach 2003, xxi; see also Anderson 2016). Yet, some of the essays in this collection also highlight the pitfalls of an overly naive understanding of the potential of migration, movement and mobility. Invoking James Clifford, Ansgar

Nünning and Birgit Neumann caution us to remember that "no metaphor comes without ideological freight. Variations in scale and scope, the multidirectionality of travels, flows and exchange processes as well as the exercise of power are often overlooked" (2012, 6). This might hold true in particular with regard to a global community and the risk of idealizing it. Furthermore, when shifting the focus to relationships not viewed through the lens of colonialism, other difficulties come into play, as Mukoma wa Ngugi (n.d., 3) aptly points out:

> To think about South-to-South relations is to enter a place of great intellectual vulnerability. Once we leave the relationship of, let's say, Africa and Europe via colonialism, the world suddenly becomes very vast, complicated, and scary as the knowledge of how just little we know settles in. Yet, this place that is just outside our comfort zone is a beautiful place to be in – it's a place of discovery of new ideas and seeing old ideas anew.

The colonial past (and occasionally, present) becomes one among the many aspects that the contributors to this special issue scrutinize, but not the central one. At the same time, however, the motivation of the texts and artworks discussed in this essay collection is not to discard any and all relations to (former) colonial centers or Western societies: "The goal is not to sublimate or ignore the West – far from it. Indeed, the West – simply because of colonialism and globalization – is a huge part of the dialogue. The goal is to be in relation with the West as with everyone else" (wa Ngugi, n.d., 3). Accordingly, the focus lies on forgoing the hierarchical element.

In the domain of Anglophone literatures and cultures, the focal point of these investigations into shifting centers and moving cultures becomes how the authors' and texts' meandering, serpentine and ambiguous travels have the "potential to build new worlds out of the materials of older ones" (Rothberg 2009, 5). Moreover, "different histories confront each other in the public sphere" and particularly in fictional and artistic interventions as the ones analyzed in this special issue, they identify themselves as multidirectional, as subject to ongoing negotiations, cross-referencing, borrowing and productive reformation (Rothberg 2009, 2). The artistic works become platforms of imagining other forms of history and identities (Rothberg 2009, 3). Both Mukoma wa Ngugi and Michael Rothberg highlight that identities come into being through the encounter and the exchange of what is deemed 'other' (wa Ngugi, n.d., 2, Rothberg 2009, 5). In the words of wa Ngugi: "Identity is formed by interactions with the other cultures. [...] In a sense, whether we acknowledge it or not, we live in what Glissant calls a 'fragmented diversity', and we are all creolized" (n.d., 2). In the process, notions of 'us' and 'them', center and margin, North and South are invariably effected and ultimately changed.

This special issue stems from a postgraduate conference on the theme "Moving Centers & Traveling Cultures", hosted at Goethe-University, Frankfurt am Main in October 2018.[4] The title of this special issue references James Clifford's essay "Traveling Cultures" (1997) which constituted an important step

in thinking culture through movement and culture as movement. Clifford pointed towards the need to move overcome the primacy of the sedentary, local, and 'authentic':

> Dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel as supplement; roots always preceded routes. But what would happen, I began to ask, if travel were untethered, seen as a complex and pervasive spectrum of human experiences? Practices of displacement might emerge as constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension. The cultural effects of European expansionism, for example, could no longer be celebrated, or deplored, as a simple diffusion outward […] For the region called 'Europe' has been constantly remade, and traversed, by influences beyond its borders (3).

After more than two decades since the publication of Clifford's essay, these observations resonate more strongly than ever. This special issue opens with Nadia Butt's essay "North-South Connections: The Representations of Travel and Travellers in Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's Fictional Memoir *My Nine Lives: Chapters of a Possible Past* (2005)". The work of Jhabvala, a British writer of German Jewish origin who moved to India in 1951 after her marriage to an Indian Parsee, offers an intriguing perspective on Clifford's idea of "dwelling-in-travel" which is central to Butt's discussion of Jhabvala's latest book. Butt explores different dimensions of travel in *My Nine Lives: Chapters of a Possible Past*, focusing on three short stories and three main aspects: travel as existence, travel as pilgrimage, travel and shifting origins. Flight, migration and travel are shared by multiple generations of Jhabvala's European and Indian characters whose journeys never entail the possibility of arrival, but whose stories cannot be read through a victimological lens, either: "[O]nce these characters have embraced mobility as their cultural condition, they go around the globe as wanderers for whom identity and belonging tend to become fleeting notions just as the notions of home and homeland". Focusing on Jhabvala's portrayals of non-linear and unusual movements, Butt shows that "journey is not merely a metaphor of cultural dialogue between the Global South and the Global North. Butt's essay also touches on metafictional concerns: starting from the observation that Jhabvala boldly travels across the boundaries of literary genre in her latest work, Butt considers travel as a mode of reading and as a structural principle of literature.

In her essay entitled "'I was going places': The Complexities of Travelling Indigenous Characters in Contemporary Maori Short Fiction", Leonie John examines different modes and representations of global indigenous mobility. As opposed to the understanding of indigeneity as stationary, and of Maori mobility as unsettling because it separates the individual from the community, John's analysis of selected short stories shows how freedom of movement does not necessarily contradict a connection to home. At the same time, the stories problematize international mobility by emphasizing the various difficulties which are frequently connected to migration. Yet, what most of the narratives analyzed demonstrate is that "globally travelling characters are actually not […] amputated limbs", as one of the main characters first believes.

Instead, indigeneity is shown to be a "dynamic construct which is constantly negotiated".

Lucy Gasser's essay "The Center Cannot Hold: Imagining the Soviet Union from the Global South" is particularly poignant in showing how centers can be moved, without altogether neglecting their previous power and contexts. Gasser looks at writings from Bengali, South African and Punjabi contexts as they engage in imaginative productions of the Soviet Union by travelers from the Global South. Gasser shows how these writers recalibrate the allocation of center and periphery through reading texts of non-European imaginations and representations of Europe alongside each other. As Gasser highlights, the Empire does not write back to the center; there are multiple centers which are temporary and come into being through contingent solidarities. The "structuring principle" is no longer the (colonial) West, and Western Europe becomes peripheral. Moscow, for example, becomes the new London; Eastern European and Eurasian spaces of the Soviet Union (as well as their cultures) become "aspirational" to Gasser's authors. This is precisely where the texts become problematic, as Gasser shows: The teleological narrative of 'having to fulfill oneself in the colonial homelands' is replaced by the need to reach ones' full potential in the USSR, and not the home country. Narratives of progress are no longer linked with the West but tied to the European East.

Jennifer Leetsch's contribution "Of Suitcases and Gunny Sacks: The Poetics of Travel in M. G. Vassanji and Shailja Patel" examines two works which connect past voyages and ocean crossings with more contemporary travels which span India, East Africa, and America: M. G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* (1989) and Shailja Patel's *Migritude* (2010). Arguing that Patel's *Migritude* carries concerns and themes inaugurated in Vassanji's seminal text into the contemporary period, Leetsch locates these two works along a diachronic axis of East Africa's literary histories and puts them in a constructive dialogue with each other. Leetsch shows how both *The Gunny Sack* and *Migritude* give expression to multilayered experiences and memories of journeys between Asia and East Africa across the Indian Ocean which give way to multiple new connections. As is the case for Butt's essay, the notion of the journey of the story and of the text as voyage is important to Leetsch's consideration of both works which do not merely represent historical and recent travels but "themselves constitute a passage between South East Asia and Africa, weaving a material connection across the water".

Tanaka Chidora and Kudzayi Ngara's essay "Harare (in the) North: the metaphor of an irresolvable exile dialectic" ties in with Mukoma wa Ngugi's cautious comment on a "vast, complicated and scary" world that migration, mobility and metamorphosis bring with them. In their readings of Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009) and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2014), Chidora directs our attention to protagonists and their expectations that immigration to the 'Global North' and exile from Africa can eventually smooth over the conflicts, tensions and struggles of the past. Yet, these migrant characters

seem to be 'lost in translation', failing to arrive in London and Detroit, respectively, and feel forced to re-invent themselves against the backdrop of the inescapable legacies of the past: "The characters in the selected texts run very fast from a crisis-ridden home, only to remain where they are through home's own reproduction in the characters' perceived places of safety". The authors conclude that these novels' protagonists find themselves locked in a form of transience. The productive potential of movement and mobility is smothered by past experiences in Harare, rendering the protagonists ultimately incapable of claiming London and Detroit as their own; they encounter city space "whose semiotic codes are alien" and remain so.

In a similar manner to Chidora and Ngara's analysis, Adebayo Sakiru's essay "Dis/ruptures of Home and Citizenship: Memory, Migration and the Production of Translocalities in Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution*" discusses a case in which painful memories of home – Ethiopia – continue to haunt the novel's protagonists. "Involuntary migrants" cross the oceans to make a new home in America, oftentimes culturally represented as a home for the "huddled masses". Their destination, Washington D.C., remains hostile to the newcomers, yet also provides these migrants with the opportunity to form networks of relationships within the urban space they occupy. Home, as Sakiru argues, is thus mobile and fluid for Mengestu's "transmigrants". Notions of belonging develop within the spaces in which family, neighbours and diasporic communities perform their hybrid cultural identities. This essay shows us how Mengestu's protagonists do not glorify, nostalgize or romanticize their (memory of) home, but form an ambivalent bond with both homes, the new and the old.

In his essay "A Novel of Transformation: Transcultural and transgender crossroads in Olumide Popoola's *When We Speak of Nothing*", Julian Wacker draws on Mark Stein's reading of the black British bildungsroman as a "novel of transformation" (2004) and on Sissy Helff's concept of the "transcultural bildungsroman" (2014) to make a case for reading Popoola's young adult novel as a novel of *trans*formation. Wacker develops a perspective in which transformation can be understood in a multifold sense: it comes into effect on the level of content, in the transgender identity and coming of age (or coming out) of the protagonist, a process in which transnational travel from Britain to Nigeria and back plays a role. Tran*s*formation also relates to what Wacker describes as the 'queering' of the form of the traditional bildungsroman. Wacker argues transcultural and transgender imaginaries "collide" in Popoola's novel. As the text follows the protagonist's coming of age and his coming out as transgender, it interweaves multiple forms and textual traditions (e.g. Yoruba folklore, transgender identities, transcultural imaginaries, the novel, the bildungsroman plot) to transform the genre characteristics of the *bildungsroman* so that it allows the author to "imagine Karl's worlding processes".

As this essay collection demonstrates, in today's increasingly connected world, the mobility of information, individuals and cultures gains in importance. At the same time, this interconnectedness results in new forms of identity and

belonging, and the traditional loci of power (such as the remnants of colonial times) are displaced and replaced. Accordingly, it is necessary to leave Eurocentric perceptions of culture behind, given the flow of people, ideas, art and literature cannot be contained in traditional, linear models of South and North, or East and West. Likewise, heteronormative depictions of culture do not do justice to the complexity of cultural and individual realities.[5]

Notes

[1] "Chaque nuit, les secrets de cette institution, selon plusieurs sources internes, se sont retrouvés stockés à plus de 8 000 km d'Addis-Abeba, sur des mystérieux serveurs hébergés quelque part à Shanghaï, la mégapole chinoise."

[2] "Rien à faire d'être écouté par les Chinois [...]. Eux au moins ne nous ont jamais colonisés, ont soutenu les luttes d'indépendance sur le continent et nous aident économiquement aujourd'hui."

[3] "Si les Chinois veulent entendre ce qu'on dit, lire ce qu'on écrit, ou n'importe qui d'autre... Je ne pense pas que l'espionnage soit une spécialité uniquement des Chinois. Nous sommes entourés d'espions, partout dans le monde".

[4] The essays were selected on the basis of each author's presentation at the conference. The Frankfurt conference was the sixth edition of *Postcolonial Narrations*, a Postgraduate Forum founded in 2013. The format addresses young scholars in the field, MA students, doctoral and (recent) postdoctoral researchers.

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