



Travel, Agency, and the Circulation of Knowledge. Graduate School, Cultural Encounters and the Discourses of Scholarship, Rostock University, 05.09.2013-07.09.2013.

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Travel, Agency, and the Circulation of Knowledge

During its seventh interdisciplinary symposium, the Rostock graduate school brought together international scholars and experts “concerned with the phenomenon and discourse of travel, transculturation, and the cross-cultural production of knowledge”. The symposium suggested a shift in critical perspective on travel writing, which should not exclusively focus on how European travelers have represented other cultures but include perceptions of those “others”, along with critical reflections on the transformations and perceptions of “traveling” knowledge itself.

During the opening session, Stephanie Wodianka (Rostock) elaborated on the discursive relevance of the concepts “travel”, “agency” and “circulation”, pointing to their role in the creation of cultural memories and the scientific production of knowledge. Reflecting on a variety of travel writing, she hinted at the phenomena of confirmation, confrontation and even oblivion of knowledge by traveling, sometimes creating a mixture between “fiction” and “fact” in the later description of the journey. This raised the question whether knowledge itself might gain a certain autonomy in the process of dissemination, taking on the role of a formative agent rather than being the mere object of circulation.

In his key-note speech, OTTMAR ETTE (Potsdam) then reflected on “Landscapes of Theory”. His reflection, dealing with the transcultural aspects of literature, took Georg Forster’s description of the harbor of Amsterdam (1790) as a starting point. He contrasted Forster’s static depiction of warship machinery with Alexander

von Humboldt’s knowledge, which is more “nomadic” and situated between various literary and scientific forms of knowledge. In this, it replicates the gradual dwindling of a central perspective in European landscape theory, which paved the way for the emergence of different kinds of knowledge.

“Nomadic” knowledge was also significant in HANNA HODACS’ (Warwick) reflection on Linnaeus’ influence on Swedish naturalists, and on the role of the excursion in natural history. A network of students provided Linnaeus with data from different geographical regions and helped complete his modernization of scientific nomenclature. Local excursions and regional traveling became part of the “travel curriculum”. Travels provided the “geographical gift” of local knowledge; potential usages of local natural resources could help making the national economy independent of imports. A close relation between scientific travels and imperial expansion emerged, the scientific knowledge about nature reinforcing the modern expansive political economy.

Local knowledge, however, could also get contested in travel writing, as MARY B. CAMPBELL’s (Brandeis) presentation showed. Campbell focused on the early modern Atlantic world, analyzing American Indian dreams and visions that had been recorded by seventeenth-century French missionaries in the Eastern Woodlands of North America. The dreams, which traditionally fulfilled collective communicative functions, were now embedded in the Jesuits’ narratives. Some of the missionaries’ reports on dreams were harshly judg-

mental. Dreams were the “enemies” of Christian faith: at the same time that they were recorded with greatest ethnographic curiosity, their power was to be destroyed in the recording.

In other instances, “geographical gifts” of local knowledge would be readily appropriated by travelers but their actual originators might remain unacknowledged. LEILA GOMEZ (Boulder) noticed that pathfinders, although they were of great importance to most travelers and explorers, appear only sporadically in travel literature, mainly as accompanying “anecdote” to the traveler’s “discovery”. Especially women, who often took the role of a local partner and pathfinder, tended to appear as “ghosts” in the travelers’ descriptions. Often, travelers pretended to be “innocent” in relation to “empire” but encounters were also shaped by imperial realities, as can be derived from the tensions arising between geographers and pathfinders in La Pampa, Argentina. Despite such tensions, travelers not only relied on pathfinders’ “maps” and knowledge but also on their traditions and authority.

Relating to a series of early modern Japanese encounters, MICHAEL HARBSMEIER (Roskilde) took a closer look at how the accounts of travelers contributed to a first global exchange of knowledge and information. Literary travel logs, for instance, constituted a rich tradition in Japanese literature. European travelers and missionaries were intensely interrogated by Japanese authorities, who were suspicious of Christian influence and possible espionage. Oral accounts given during these interrogations were written down in Japanese language, providing a kind of meta-ethnography. This could include nationalist re-interpretations of the original accounts, underlining the dangers of contact with the European countries.

Transformation through interpretation was a common pattern in processes of “(re-)editing” prior travelers’ and explorers’ accounts. SHARON KINOSHITA (Santa Cruz) reviewed the mythologization of Marco Polo as “The Traveler”, pointing to a common disinformation about Marco Polo and his writings. In the Middle Ages, manuscripts of the work that later became known as “The Travels” of Marco Polo had different titles, none of which included the word “travel”. To categorize this book as a “travel account”, and thus to demand “authentic” and accurate descriptions of it, is largely misleading. Later editions of Polo’s writings, containing numerous presumptions and inaccurate translations, led to distortions of the overall meaning of the text. A new edition and translation proved necessary, so as to preserve the genuine historical context.

Staying within Mediterranean discourse, FRIEDRICH WOLFZETTEL (Frankfurt am Main) focused on the literary motif of the grand city in nineteenth-century French and Italian literature, in which Rome took a special place. Instead of providing a characteristic description of the milieu in which the plots of the novels are situated, the city of Rome was almost always presented as destination of a search, a sacred environment into which the stranger is initiated. The novel about Rome thus poses a remodeling of the classic pilgrimage whose discourse of redemption and initiation is translated into modern forms of awakening and self-realization.

Staying in the nineteenth century, RUPERT GADERER (Bochum) dealt with Johann Gottfried Seume’s travelogue *Spaziergang nach Syrakus im Jahre 1802*. It focused on the item that Seume carried all along his marathon march: the knapsack. Next to the implication of traveling, the knapsack also had a military connotation: it used to be part of the infantry soldiers’ marching package. In his travelogue, Seume developed a theory of walking that resembled a military way of moving (excessive marching, calculation of the distances to travel, healing of travel wounds, etc.) but also presented panoramic views on eye-level when meeting people along his way.

Another travelogue, Chamisso’s *Voyage around the World* (1836), was discussed by GABRIELE DÄRBECK (Vechta). DÄRBECK concentrated on that aspect of the travelogue describing the Russian expedition of 1815-17 into the Arctic that Chamisso had accompanied as a natural scientist. His collection of plants and birds from the journey were exhibited in museums in Berlin and St. Petersburg. The collected items served as a base for a scientific taxonomy and classificatory system, which, however, remained fragmented. The production of knowledge was bound to “archival practices” in the field (both in an immediate sense and in the sense of Foucault’s conceptual metaphor of the “archive”) and their subsequent narrative representation.

The predicament of narrative representation also concerns the problem of authorship. BRUCE GREENFIELD (Dalhousie) focused on the manuscript *Observations on Hudson’s Bay* (1743) by James Isham. Greenfield analyzed the detailed bilingual word lists in English and Cree vocabularies, along with fictional dialogues in Cree language devised by Isham. The writings represented observations and speech situations obtained in conversations with local inhabitants during Isham’s 10 years long stay in the area. Greenfield read this text, with its share of tac-

tical knowledge, in terms of textual bricolage. One might situate this text in terms of a colonial appropriation of local knowledge and “authenticity” in favor of the imperial project. Read from a postcolonial perspective, however, Isham’s text preserves important knowledge by offering an entry into the oral world of Hudson Bay at the time of colonial contest in America.

The analysis of DANIEL NEWMAN (Durham) focused on the “discovering of Europe” through travelers from the Arab world. One example centered on the first published travelogue of Rifa’a al-Tahtawi, a young Egyptian imam who arrived in France in 1826. The account gives insights about how the “other” was “translated” and “naturalized” in the eyes of the travelers. The *Rihla* travel and geographical literature constituted a whole genre in the Arab world, creating transnational knowledge networks among Islamic intellectuals. While few of the authors were widely known during the 19th century, they were later “re-discovered”, and their works disseminated through print.

Forms of “re-discovery” can also occur in various other media. DEAN MACCANNEL (Davis) discussed tourist attractions and objects, looking at how these came to be “disembodied” through virtual representations in the World Wide Web. It would not be the presence or absence of the body that makes touristic objects “being disembodied” but the absence of a context in the virtual world that provides an “all-ready interpreted” cosmos. This would require a reflection on the impossible authenticity of cultural attractions that always refer to a memory of a represented past, and on the desire of tourists to distinguish themselves from other tourists.

The differentiation between such categories as “tourist”, “traveler” or “explorer” might indeed be a matter of ambivalence. ÅUKASZ WIERZBICKI (Poznan), himself a freelancer, recounted and performed the story of Kazimierz Nowak. The explorer, photographer and reporter Nowak had, between 1931 and 1936, traveled across Africa on bicycle, horseback, canoe and on foot. On his tour, he wrote more than 110 letters, accompanied by extraordinary photos, which he sent to different Polish newspapers that published them. The newspaper articles brought the African continent and its inhabitants to the consciousness of the Polish public. Contradicting the colonial ideology of the time, Nowak, himself a poor man who used his unusual journey as a means to survive, had many intimate and sensitive encounters with local people who he met along his route. Years later, Wierzbicki traveled in Nowak’s tracks across the con-

continent, met with elders who remembered Nowak from the 1930s, and thereby induced a new “wave” of circulating knowledge about the photographer-explorer and his African encounters.

In the final paper, MARTIN DUSINBERRE (Newcastle) not only talked about people traveling but also about traveling objects, like the Japanese steam ship *Yamashiro-maru*. This was one of the most modern and fastest steam ships in the late 1880s and 1890s. Newspapers of the time excessively reported about the technical details of this “pride of the Japanese merchant navy”. Among its 120 officers and crew members, there were also several Europeans, like the captain John M. Mahlmann, originally from Hamburg. His autobiography provides interesting insights into the world-political context of navigation and its ideologies at the time of high imperialism.

In the final discussion, Tim Youngs, Stephanie Wodińska, and Gesa Mackenthun pulled together some of the ideas raised during the symposium. Travel, they agreed, remains a highly contested source of knowledge, just as knowledge “travels” and circulates between sometimes incompatible epistemic worlds. Knowledge can never travel without the (cross-cultural, mediating, translational) agency of human beings.

Conference Overview:

Ottmar Ette (Potsdam): Landscapes of Theory. Travel and Life Knowledge (Keynote address)

Hanna Hodacs (Warwick): Knowledge Generation, Education and Careers â the Role of Traveling in Linnæan Natural History

Mary B. Campbell (Brandeis): Telling Dreams: Oneiric Circulation in Early Modern âNew Franceâ

Leila Gomez (Boulder, Colorado): âLocal Knowledgeâ and Science: The Role of Pathfinders in Travel Narratives

Michael Harbsmeier (Roskilde): Seclusion and Circulation: Dutch-Japanese Circulations of Knowledge

Sharon Kinoshita (Santa Cruz): Re-Orienting Marco Polo

Friedrich Wolfzettel (Frankfurt am Main): Rome, lieu de la connaissance. RÃ©cit de voyage et structures du roman franÃ§ais au XIXe siÃ¨cle

Rupert Gaderer (Bochum): Things in the Knapsack. Johann Gottfried Seume’s *Spaziergang nach Syrakus im*

Jahre 1802

Gabriele DÄ¼rbeck (Vechta): The Arctic and the Cultural Archive: Adelbert von Chamisso's *Voyage Round the World*

Bruce Greenfield (Dalhousie): Tactics of Authorship: James Isham's *Observations on Hudson's Bay, 1743*

Daniel Newman (Durham): Construction of an Image: Mediating the Other in Nineteenth-Century Arab Travel Accounts on Europe

Dean MacCannell (Davis): Embodied Knowledge in

the Digital Age

Åukasz Wierzbicki (Poznan): The Story of Kazimierz Nowak â the Man who Traveled Across Africa on Bicycle and Horseback in the 1930âs and the Aftermath of his Journey

Martin Dusinberre (Newcastle): Making Pease with the Past: A Captain, a Japanese Ship, and a Somewhat Dull Autobiography

Tim Youngs (Nottingham), Stephanie Wodianka (Rostock), Gesa Mackenthun (Rostock): Final Panel

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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