

Modernities in the Contact Zone: Translating across Unfamiliar Objects

October 21-23 2021, Universität Potsdam

<https://postcolonial-narrations.net/2021-conference/>

Many forms that we today recognize as modern sprang from what Mary Louise Pratt defines as contact zones: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 34). Pratt also uses the concept of contact zones as models for on-going communities of teaching and research. Here, we intend to frame contact zones as sites of translations—in the broadest sense of carrying over meaning—and the emergence of “unfamiliar objects”. These zones of contact that enable translations and produce the unfamiliar make visible the reality of modernity as “singular but not one” (Wiemann 10). Talal Asad conceives of modernity as a project that “aims at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market - and secularism” (13); and for David Scott colonised peoples were “conscripted to modernity’s project” (9) and must, for better or worse, think, and act - and resist - from within it as it becomes one of “the fundamental conditions of choice” (19). We both wish to think from, and beyond these understandings in order to work with an idea of modernity instead as what is produced in the *encounters* between this (Western, imperial) project, and its ‘others’ in the contact zone. Translations operate in these spaces not only as linguistic but cultural maneuvers “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 11). Objects, cultural or otherwise, are rendered unfamiliar when we activate the category that Emily Apter has called the “Untranslatable”, which she defines, in her book *Against World Literature*, as “the logic of grammar, the limits of reference, the outer reach of thinkability” (19) Unfamiliar objects are represented, spoken about, and mediated through forms of translation. Historically, such translation has been the central guiding force through which imperial power, not least through the circulation and imposition of colonial languages, was able

to wield dominance over colonies. This has also resulted in translation becoming the only medium through which postcolonial discourse and writings at large could enter Western or “global” discourse and claim a stake within modernity. The negotiation between contact zones is inescapably fraught with disparities and charged with political undertones as it creates and supports structures of power.

The affective field of this schema has been read and analysed by scholars like Gayatri Spivak, Simon Gikandi, Apter, and Dipesh Chakravarti among others within the frame of globalization; more specifically, as the globalization of the humanities. This can be contextualised within the very eurocentric and eurochronic bent of Western academia, even as decolonizing efforts have emerged in the past two decades. And as renewed nationalist rhetoric has proliferated in the era of populist and right-wing fascist movements, the “progressive” model of modernity that stands against it is quite often derived out of a eurocentric enlightenment era model of progress and modernity. It seems pertinent to reflect upon the legacies of discourse that have led to this moment, as we enter the decade that is, between the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermaths, the rise of right wing nationalism, the unfolding of the fight for climate justice, undoubtedly going to define the 21st century.

In the 2021 GAPS postgraduate forum, we wish to think about how translations, and more specifically, the untranslatable and the unfamiliar, enable not just interventions into or against a codified, universal Modernity but also locate modernity in the present, and produce its rhizomatic forms. We seek to understand how translations at the contact zone, and what exceeds them, form not only the vernacular, the idiolects, and the articulations of modernity, but also its syntax and grammar. We invite approaches that trace and unsettle the assemblage that defines our definitions of border regimes, ecological regimes, and topographies of culture (material and virtual) that define our age. More specifically, we welcome applications that engage with the ways in which translations *produce* contact zones, which themselves produce the unfamiliar objects of the border. We ask: How do these unfamiliar objects relate themselves, and how are they related, to modernity? How do they produce different articulations of modernity? How might they constitute lines of flight from a eurochronic modernity? And finally, how do these vernacular modernities generate their own translations?

We invite abstracts that engage with the theme and may include, but are not limited to the following:

- vernacular modernities that are complicit with or contradictory to colonialities of knowledge
- vernacular modernities as translations of eurocentric modernity
- practices of translation from within/out structures of power
- power disparities between Global North and Global South encounters
- contemporary translation theory and the politics of the “Untranslatable”
- “contact zones” as zones of encounter within cultural objects like literature, performance, and

popular culture

- de- and postcolonial translation and the labour of translating
- material objects as contact zones and their depiction/representation in art, literature and popular culture
- translation in border regimes
- defamiliarization as resistance practice
- producing unfamiliar objects as decolonial practice

We invite contributions at a length of 15-20 minutes in the form of papers to be read which will be followed by a discussion. Please note that in case of a hybrid/digital conference, options like recorded paper presentations or video essays will also be available.

Please send your abstract of not more than 300 words together with a bio-note of not more than 150 words in PDF format to postcolonialnarrations@g-a-p-s.net. As an alternative, we also accept abstracts in the form of a short video or an audio presentation. The media file should not exceed 3-5 mins in duration. You may also submit your abstract by filling out [this questionnaire](#). **Please note that you only need to use one medium (email, audio, video, or the questionnaire) to submit your abstract.**

We will accept applications until **18.07.2021**.

We hope that we will be able to host the Postgraduate Forum at Uni Potsdam in person. However, we will make a call on this by mid-September 2021 so that participants have enough time to plan. Please be advised that GAPS and Uni Potsdam are not in a position to fund travel bursaries or visas at this time.

The Organising Committee

Priyam Goswami Choudhury, Kathleen Samson, Baldeep Grewal, and Florian Schybilski

--

Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature*. Verso, 2013.

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford UP, 2003.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession*, 1991, pp. 33-40.

Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity. The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Duke UP, 2004.

Wiemann, Dirk. *Genres of Modernity. Contemporary Indian Novels in English*. Rodopi, 2008.