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Translocal Constellations: Towards a New World Literature

Abstract: Since the 1960s, the accelerating pace of global flows and migration have been rendering national borders and cultural boundaries more permeable, leading to the emergence of a rich body of literature of mobility and migration, also conceptualized as "new world literature." Adopting Walter Benjamin's thought on language, translation, and constellations, in addition to transnational, transcultural, and cosmopolitan perspectives in contemporary theory, I introduce a new parameter, the translocal constellation, as a lens for the analysis of dynamic configurations of mobility as well as emplacement in this emerging literature. As models for the analysis of translocal constellations, I focus on two contemporary narratives: Emine Sevgi Özdamar's story "The Courtyard in the Mirror" (2006) and Teju Cole's novel *Open City* (2012).

Keywords: constellation (Walter Benjamin), cosmopolitanism, hybridity, migration, new world literature, *Open City* (Teju Cole), placial particularity, planetary turn, post-colonial criticism, sensuous geographies, strangers, "The Courtyard in the Mirror" (Emine Sevgi Özdamar), transculturality, translocal constellations, translocality, transnationalism, *Weltliteratur*

Since the second half of the twentieth century, processes of decolonization and globalization, of migration and diaspora, have produced a rich body of literature which explores and reflects on the multifaceted movements and multicultural conditions shaping new identities and modes of living in the contemporary world. In the course of this development, the concept of "world literature" has been rejuvenated and reoriented from Goethe's original notion of *Weltliteratur*, understood as a canon of texts that are read globally beyond national boundaries, to an international field where literatures and peoples meet. Accordingly, in addition to earlier post-colonial studies, new transdisciplinary scholarship has been developed, with transnational, transcultural, and cosmopolitan perspectives for analysing a "new world literature" and its complex processes of interaction between and across cultures.

In what follows, I shall introduce a new parameter of translocality to reflect on the narratives and poetics of this emerging literature and to contemplate manifold practices of mobility as well as emplacement, in other words, embracing them both

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as being always "in process." Developing my argument for translocality and translocal constellations on the basis of burgeoning forms of contemporary new world literature, I adopt Walter Benjamin's thought on language, translation, and constellations. I will first give a brief summary of recent scholarship, which has opened up new transnational, transcultural, and cosmopolitan perspectives.

Transnationalism as a critical discourse includes the examination of the nation through its various "nation-building" institutions, such as language, culture, politics, society, and history. In his work on transnational connections, which contemplates various aspects of contemporary globalism from the perspective of anthropology and the social sciences, Ulrich Hannerz coined the term "global ecumene," which highlights the interconnectedness of today's world through interactions, exchanges, and related developments – affecting not least the organization of culture (1996, 7). New lines of thought emerged with Benedict Anderson's path-breaking study on nations as imagined communities (1983); Homi K. Bhabha's inspiring edited collection on narrative strategies of nation-building (1990); and Jean-Francois Lyotard's sophisticated challenge to the "national culture" metanarrative, which he argued was in decline (1984). Increased migration in recent decades has also generated a new understanding of globalization and cosmopolitanism. According to the sociologist Ulrich Beck, the cosmopolitanization process means globalization from within national societies, with important transformations in daily identities, since global problems have turned to be part of our day-to-day life and of global governance structures (Beck 2000). This is the fundamental difference from the older concept of globalization, which delimits something that is outside the nation. The concept of transculturality gained momentum in the 1990s. The philosopher Wolfgang Welsch (1999) has developed an understanding of the transcultural that is based on the fact that the general feature of all cultures today is hybridization, and as such overcomes the limitations of multiculturalism or interculturalism, which are still grounded in the traditional concept of single cultures and, therefore, promote exclusivity instead of inclusivity.

The transnational, cosmopolitan, and transcultural dimensions of literary and cultural practice have been addressed in many different interpretive models and approaches challenging insinuated forms of national or cultural homogeneity and concepts of identity in terms of nation, national language, and culture. Against the background of Europe's migration crisis in the 1990s, Sidonie A. Smith and I edited an essay collection on transnational literature, *Writing New Identities: Gender, Nation, and Immigration in Contemporary Europe* (Brinker-Gabler and Smith 1997). Other works, to name only a few, have addressed the growing body of writing "outside the nation" (Seyhan 2000) or "WritingbetweenWorlds," undermining the borders between *National-* and *Weltliteratur* (Ette 2006). New perspectives have developed on writers of a "new world literature" (Sturm-Trigonakis 2007), trans-

cultural writers in the age of mobility (Dagnino 2015), or writers of "ex(tra)territoriality," opening the utopian horizon of a new freedom, another space, new margins (Lassalle and Weissmann 2014). All these studies have drawn attention to the multiple trajectories created by various kinds of mobility that move people between different countries, cultures, languages, and communication practices.

In terms of global flows, mobility, and interconnectedness, another agenda emerged in the 1990s, which seemed to move in the opposite direction, a so-called spatial turn or a politics of location. With decolonization and post-colonial studies entering critical discourse from the 1970s onward, attention had shifted to people on the so-called periphery whose self-determination required not just the rediscovery of a "pure" place and culture but an understanding of the dynamic nature of all cultures (Fanon 1963). Adding a deconstructionist lens, post-colonial analysis fostered a rethinking of many assumptions about space, emphasizing, for example, how it had been entangled in the fantastical construction of colonized world(s) (Said 1978). In the 1990s, the field of geography moved to the centre of critical discourses on spatial processes in the social sciences and humanities. The geographer Doreen Massey, in her essay "A Global Sense of Place" (1994), countered the argument that place and the local dissolve as the result of globalization. She argued that the local does not dissolve and its "social meaning" does not vanish. However, we must challenge a conservative sense of place tied to origin and authenticity that is devoid of temporality: if we dynamize space and place with time, placial narratives will change. Massey suggested thinking of place as a "meeting place," that is, a place open to change, to flows and connections.

The French geographer Daniel Courgeau (n.d.) had already introduced the term "translocality" in the 1970s, applying it to his special field of demography. Around the turn of the present century, the term was newly theorized and created an opportunity to challenge spatial restrictions with multidirectional global interconnections, as well as to emphasize the continuing importance of the production of locality (Appadurai 1996). As the social scientist Michael Peter Smith summarized, translocality defines "situated yet mobile subjectivities," that is, a mode of multiple emplacement or situatedness both *here* and *there*" (Smith 2011, 181; emphasis in original). In 2013, the anthropologist Clemens Greiner and the geographer Patrick Sakdapolrak published a highly informative overview of the employment of translocality as a research perspective in the social sciences that involves mobility, migration, circulation, and spatial interconnectedness. They point out that scholars who have developed conceptual approaches to the term usually build on insights from transnationalism while at the same time attempting to overcome some of the limitations of this long-established research perspective. What defines the new approach of translocality is the use of the two central dimensions of mobility and place along with their socio-spatial dynamics. Unlike

transnational studies, the perspective of translocality focuses not only on national border-crossings but expands to include manifold crossings of continents, megacities, and regional and rural borders. As such, it can be applied – in contrast to transnationalism – to research on internal migration (that is, migration within national borders), which makes up the greater part of global migration dynamics today (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013).

By now, translocality has been applied widely in various studies in the social sciences; more recently, however, this perspective has been adopted in literary and cultural studies as well. One example is the essay collection by scholars in post-colonial English studies at the University of Münster entitled *Postcolonial Translocations: Cultural Representation and Critical Spatial Thinking* (Munkelt et al. 2012). Testing the uses and limitations of translocation as an open exploratory model for a critically spatialized post-colonial studies, the book covers a wide range of cultural expressions (e.g. literature, film and television, photography and the arts) from the anglophone world and beyond. In their insightful introduction, the editors see the advantage of the translocal perspective as an addition to earlier studies on the hybridization and creolization of diasporic cultures, bringing to today's critical spatial thinking a more refined concentration on mobility and the dynamic process of location and emplacement as intervention.

In *Literature's Sensuous Geographies: Postcolonial Matters of Place* (2015), the Danish comparatist Sten Pultz Moslund turns to phenomenological approaches to place and language, drawing inspiration from Heidegger, Dufresne, and Deleuze, among others. According to Moslund, post-colonial studies have focused on the discursive challenges of imperial master narratives. He mentions, for example, studies on the Caribbean by Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, which specifically concentrated on the journey, translation, movement, interhuman relations, and the various diasporas in the Caribbean – but make no mention of the Caribbean as a phenomenal place and environment (Moslund 2015, 180–181). To open up relations to the world other than discursive ones, Moslund suggests the paradigm of sensuous geographies, that is, the exploration of sense-aesthetic dimensions of embodied experiences of placial worlds.

Thus, we may conclude, global flows, increased movement, and migration create a heightened awareness for mobility and interconnectedness as well as new negotiations of place, in which people are situated and live in particular ways tied to specific contexts – yielding a multipositionality which I try to balance with caution in my approach to translocal constellations. Walter Benjamin's thought on language, translation, and constellations, I suggest, offers a complex

and flexible intellectual site for thinking translocality through by applying his thought on language to place and cross-cultural practice.[1]

Traditionally, translation theory is based on a bifurcation of target and source language; this bifurcation is undermined in Benjamin's understanding of languages as always different and supplemental at the same time. According to Benjamin, languages differ in their mode of intention (*Art des Meinens*), but he also notes that the relatedness and kinship of all languages, that is, their translatability, resides within this mode of intention because no single language can attain by itself a mode of intention (Benjamin 1968a, 73–74). By extension, where place is concerned, we only can begin to grasp the specificity of a place, or placial particularity, by learning about other places, supplementing our understanding of the place that we believe we know or belong to. Using Benjamin's framework of language, we can say that all places are distinct as well as non-hierarchically interrelated. From this perspective, what we define as a familiar place is actually "foreign," and will only become familiar with our expansion into different places. It is important to understand that this move is not from one place to another, but an expansion that involves a double "creation" of location – of the particularity of the seemingly familiar place and the specificity of the new place – to which I bring my placial particularity, or what I call placeability. Whenever this happens, there emerges a constellation that is open to a manifold triggered heterogeneity that allows, most importantly for Benjamin, "reverberation" and "supplementation" (1968a, 74, 76).

In addition, I am drawing here on Benjamin's methodological image of the constellation, which he reveals in his *German Tragic Drama* and later develops further in his *Arcades Project* and "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (Benjamin 1998, 1999, 1968b). Based on the *Sternbild* as *Konstellation*, a constellation is defined as the potential of displaying the relation of juxtaposed changing elements within an overarching unity of disunity, in which they gain "actuality" and are grasped instantaneously from a viewpoint, but never become fixed. Accordingly, in my model, "constellation" serves as a conceptual tool for overcoming the duality of global/local and elucidating the experience of placial particularity that undergoes multifaceted transformations, creating a translocality that is always open to change, and as such, is a configuration always in motion.

Let me briefly outline what I see as the beneficial ways in which this model complements previous approaches I discussed earlier. The attentiveness to the creative process of places, reverberation, and supplementation in the concept of the constellation resists, in my opinion, any simple understanding of origin, or

1 On Benjamin's translation theory, see Brinker-Gabler (2016).

mobility, hybridity, or performativity. The model of the translocal constellation emphasizes provisional placial particularity always in a process of expansion, which lets connections and contrasts emerge instantaneously in various translocal constellations depending on diverse contexts. Some scholarship of globalization has emphasized the imminent weakening of the local parallel to growing transnational interconnectedness and transcultural communication. Clearly, the contextual understanding of placial particularities in a constellation promotes not only an understanding of recognized "locals," but also sincerely considers heterogeneous "locals" in their particularity around the world at risk of being marginalized or even of disappearing.

Furthermore, following more recent criticism of an exclusive focus on fluid boundaries and identities, we may ask: if the transnational or transcultural is looked at positively as a fluid space, always in the making, does it become a shallow or superficial space, even promoting violent fluidity? An equally urgent question right now is how virtual reality will overshadow what we are accustomed to call reality. The concept of the translocal constellation tries to avoid eclipsing or absorbing placial particularity, and, at the same time, attempts to stay attentive to mobility and cultural flows with a focus on expansion. This allows for consideration of various forms of dynamic interaction between a territorial localization (centring) within specific contexts and processes of delocalization (and decentring) under specific conditions, such as practices of mobility, multilingualism, and global communication.

Identity is learned in relation with people and places forming one's placeability. In today's complex cultural configurations, placeability will be challenged in a process of negotiation at an early stage. As a concept, hybridity offers the possibility of leaving dichotomous thinking behind and seriously confronting crucial contradictions in today's world. There are nuanced explorations of multiperspectivity via hybridity, but there is also the danger of unassuming moves to mixture, collapsing hybridity into a fixed category without engaging profoundly with its structure and relevant contexts. Translocality offers instead a process of expansion and actualization within emerging constellations, which can then be unpacked in their complexity of locations and contexts.

At this juncture, I wish to reflect on the presentation and readability of such an actualizing constellation of the translocal by briefly looking at two narratives: Emine Sevgi Özdamar's short story "Der Hof im Spiegel" (Özdamar 2001), brilliantly translated by Leslie Adelson as "The Courtyard in the Mirror" (Özdamar 2006), and Teju Cole's novel *Open City* (2012).[2] Özdamar is a Turkish-German writer who has

2 Cole's novel has been translated into several languages, including German (Cole 2013).

been successfully publishing stories and novels in German since the 1990s and is now a celebrated, well-known writer. Many publications have analysed her work and given particular attention to the representation of the migratory experience. In her article "Comparative Cultural Studies and Ethnic Minority Writing today," Sabine Milz (2002) highlights the "fluidity of belonging" and cultural "hybridity" in Özdamar's writing and compares this with another example of "minority writing" by the Caribbean Canadian writer Marlene Nourbese Philipp. In what follows, I explore the possibility of reading Özdamar's story as an articulation of a carefully constructed composite of an expanding particularity that assembles relationships and the specificities of a site into a translocal constellation.

In the story "Der Hof im Spiegel," the narrator, coming from afar, settles in a large German city. She inhabits and navigates her place, which offers a view of a courtyard, by strategically placing mirrors around her apartment, allowing her an expanded view into the public/private spaces of her neighbours. Creating her multiperspectival setting, she has in mind a French urban specialist who once wrote "about the residential aesthetic of the Orient" (Özdamar 2006), that is, how people there extend their houses into alleyways resembling labyrinths where neighbours wake up nose-to-nose. With these three mirrors, she has extended her apartment and built her very own neighbourhood as a meaningful meeting place. For her, it brings back feelings from her upbringing in Turkey, which comfort her now. In other words, she has come to her new place and brought with her a particular "placeability," a geographical imaginary of home. With the extended space of her mirrors, she connects with her present by watching her neighbours and engaging emotionally with their everyday life, such as the nun who enjoys reading *Alice in Wonderland* in her bed, and with the woman from Africa who bakes bread on the windowsill every day while her four children are playing. In addition, the mirrors provide an imagined space for relating to those who live in an "other" place. Whenever she picks up the phone and talks to family and friends back in Turkey, she looks into the mirrors, where they become present. What emerges here is not just a connection of two sites, here and there, but a contingent and shifting formation across borders, blurring the distinction between here and there – in other words, a translocal constellation.

Özdamar's story beautifully mirrors the reverberation and supplementation of placial particularity and relationality of past and present that are actualized in a process of expansion and constellation. She looks into the mirrors and watches her "world," which includes people who are living and who have died. The merging of multiple layers of time and placial worlds in the mirrors creates a mediated world experience with self-reflexivity, and allows the narrator to access the beloved people of her past and present, to come to terms with her memories and past movements, and to build an understanding of her present and the people she meets on

an everyday basis in her new life. Rather than a gradual process of synthesis or hybridity, we find in Özdamar's story a juxtaposition of heterogeneous places and experiences, out of which emerges a discontinuous, fragmentary expansion and translocal constellation that is guided, in her case, by compassion. It is with compassion that she watches and engages with her neighbours, that she reaches back to childhood memories, people lost, her friend Jon's poetry, which she complements with German poetry, weaving pain, solitude, and sometimes desperation into her story.

I would now like to compare Özdamar's translocal constellation with the Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole's presentation of a translocality in his first novel, *Open City*. The novel focuses on issues of identity, race, dislocation, and history. It is a post-colonial, a migrant, and also a post-9/11 novel. The first-person narrator in *Open City* is Julian, who is of both of German and Nigerian descent, and, as a psychiatrist, spends his final year of a psychiatry fellowship in New York city after 9/11. Julius is a wanderer in the streets of his adopted city, reminding us on the exemplary figure of modern life presented in Georg Simmel's essay "The Stranger," first published in 1908. According to Simmel, a stranger is a "person who comes today and goes tomorrow," with a "proportion of nearness and remoteness" that is the aura of "objectivity" (Simmel 1950, 402–404). In this guise, we follow Julius across the city, wandering, observing, and recording stories, calmly, seemingly undisturbed, in an ambience of disconnectedness.

In his reading of Cole's novel, Pieter Vermeulen argues that it affirms aesthetic cosmopolitanism. In other words, it "refuses to celebrate intercultural feeling and understanding as valuable cosmopolitan achievements in and of themselves" (2014, 55). In this way, cosmopolitanism is preserved and remains to be achieved in an uncertain future.[3] In addition to the frame of cosmopolitanism, I suggest critically examining the novel further by drawing on placial particularity and the translocal constellation. Longer passages of Julius's early life in Nigeria, as well as fragmentary memories of his past there, evoke an upbringing that is shaped by his experience of otherness among Nigerians as a biracial child, for example not feeling "black" enough at a military school, an "otherness" further intensified by the alienation from his German mother and loss of his Nigerian father when he was fourteen (Cole 2012, 227). Clearly, there is a dissociation in Julius's early life in his Nigerian place world that significantly shapes his placeability. Coming to New York, Julius is faced with a more-than-fast "naturalization process," as in this city he is treated like other native blacks, for instance by African Americans who address him as "brother" (40).

3 For a recent discussion of a number of traits of cosmopolitanism in narrative, see McClusky (2013).

He remains reserved, however, and is more inclined to just fit in than he is willing to express sympathy or to be acknowledged by others for his own history or heritage. In the absence of a clear cultural identity and a belief that cultures are not fixed or static, Julius finds enchantment in the "world without words" and sensuous silence; he loves to listen to classical music, especially to the work of Gustav Mahler. Certainly, we find in his passion an echo of a cosmopolitan longing: "[…] Mahler's music, is not white, or black, not old or young and whether it is even specifically human, rather than in accord with more universal vibrations is open to question" (252).

Unlike Özdamar, Julius does not create his own close-knit neighbourhood or stay closely connected with the placial world of his upbringing. He focuses instead on the placial particularities in the city and the diversity of its people. He has chance encounters with many people from near and far, often immigrants, who offer personal accounts filled with pain and violence, past and present, and he visits various places in the city, among them places of atrocities, such as the burial ground of slaves next to Wall Street, and the 9/11 Memorial. In addition, Julius's imagination crosses and recrosses times and places, which allows him – like the iconic modern figure of the *flâneur* – to tell alternative stories. For example, passing the city's most infamous site, where a crowd is hemmed in on both sides by a chain-like fence, he remembers: "No bodies were visible, except the falling ones, on the day America's ticker stopped" (Cole 2012, 58). His personal memory of "erasure" on this special day calls forth the manifold "erasures" that happened at this place, such as the tearing down of the old Washington Market for the World Trade Center buildings, and the disappearance of the Christian-Syrian enclave established in the late 1800s or of other communities' settlements before even Columbus set sail (59). Local as well as global stories of atrocities are interwoven with the story, such as those relating to Native American history, the Holocaust, or the Rwanda genocide. As such, the "local" – the place of New York city – emerges as a multidirectional assemblage with numerous crossovers of the local and the global, which light up momentarily in a translocal constellation which is always in transformation.

Julius's experience of New York City is different from the experience that Michel de Certeau presents in his seminal essay "Walking in the City" (1984), where an urban space is constantly produced through embodied experiences of moving freely through the streets. In the novel *Open City*, freedom of movement has a darker side: the continuous confrontation with and reflection on violence and atrocities, past and present, in the old and new world. There is clearly a bold statement not only of the failure of modernity but of the failure of humanity in general. Julius's translocal constellation is not stirred by compassion, as in Özdamar's story, but seemingly motivated by countering forgetfulness.

Julius is a self-reflexive narrator who embraces his disengaged modes of relation to the world as an intentional defence against the shrieking noise of political and racial ideology in everyday life. This is brilliantly illuminated in Julius's pairing with a doppelgänger. On a trip to Brussels, he meets the intellectual Farouq from Marocco, who passionately embraces cultural difference, even with violent consequences (Cole 2012, 107). Julius raises for himself the ultimate question of cosmopolitanism discussed today: that is, whether it is a possible practice based on a disconnected mode of one's own culture and other cultures, and has an apolitical stance, or whether it should be a practice with universal concern and recognition of legitimate difference, even violence.

Julius cultivates detachment, but also presents a multidirectional memory project that lends significance to places and human stories focused on overcoming amnesia and forgetfulness of discursive and real violence in history and everyday life. Toward the end of the story, however, readers begin to doubt Julius's reliability as narrator: he apparently covers up a violent act of his own during his past upbringing in Nigeria (Cole 2012, 244). The final pages offer yet another perspective, a "planetary turn," to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's phrase.[4] Julius experiences a severe disruption of his seemingly "comfortable" and privileged disconnected mode of seeing and recording the world. One evening, he visits a performance of Mahler's ninth symphony in Carnegie Hall; he leaves early and steps out of an exit door, which places him all of a sudden in the open air on a fire escape high above the city streets. Staring up at the night sky with thousands of stars, and reflecting on starlight travelling millions of miles per hour to reach the earth (and the dark spots with stars whose light has not reached him yet), he has a revelation about the relativity of time and space, and with it the limits of historical narratives (256). This is a moment of sensuous presence as a "planetary creature" facing the universe at the edge of the earth and time, the instantaneous appearance of translocality in deep space. To adapt Benjamin's wording (1999, 462): "It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, [...] [translocality] is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the *now* to form a constellation" (my emphasis).

For Julius, the borders of memory and amnesia become blurred. Instead of the coherence of memory and narrative, there are uncertainties and discontinuities beyond any human control. With this comes recognition of the hazard of anthropocentric thinking and the apocalyptic vision of a planet altered beyond recognition. The novel closes with a model of humble recording and agency against the background

4 In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak (2003) introduces the concept of planetary standing for thinking in wholly new ways about the ethical labour of contemporary culture.

of a human-inflicted environmental disaster in the past, and foreboding of many more to come. Teju Cole brings back a grand figure of the nineteenth century, Colonel Tassin, stationed on Liberty Island. On a trip to this island, Julius thinks of Tassin, who observed the killing of thousands of migrating birds that were fatally distracted by the flame from the torch of the Statue of Liberty (Cole 2012, 258–259). He diligently kept count of the number and species of birds that were killed by flying into the statue, and also took care of having them preserved in scientific institutions instead of selling them at the market. The image of the killed birds on Liberty Island is a reminder of another killing by collision more than a century later – and brings to the "time of the now" an ethical decision in favour of nature that has the potential to create new meanings and narratives.

Translocality, with the guiding image of the constellation, captures the open, non-linear processes of interconnectedness and relationality of people and places in modern cultures today. The concept provides a new set of tools for analysing literary and cultural practice, one that considers both the trajectories of movement as well as the dynamics of emplacement. It is attentive to global and local wanderings as well as to diverse placial practices, sensuous placial experiences, and imagined placial worlds. Placial particularity is not static or fixed in a "here and there," but understood as undergoing transformations in a process of expansion which is fragmentary and discontinuous, and captured in instantaneous actualizations of translocal constellations. Translocality, if further developed, may serve to establish a new broad category in literature, that of translocal literature, offering a horizon of multiple forms of situated yet mobile subjectivities and their cultural expressions. This needs further exploration with regard to the now of the author and the reader, as well as production and distribution parameters.

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