

Fugitive Knowledges: The Preservation and Loss of Knowledge in Cultural Contact Zones

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From September 27 to 29, 2012, the DFG graduate school „Cultural Encounters and the Discourses of Scholarship“ hosted its sixth international and interdisciplinary symposium in Rostock, Germany. With contributions of scholars working in the fields of literature, history, ethnology, and anthropology the conference asked for the preservation and dispersal of knowledges that had been generated in the course of cultural encounters and conflicts in world regions such as West and South Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, Latin America and North America. SUSANNE LACHENICHT (Bayreuth) served as main discussant during the three-day meeting.

In his keynote lecture, ALI BEHDAD (Los Angeles, USA) took up the leading questions of the conference by analyzing nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs from Iran. As Behdad argued, the visual archive produced in this period was a product of contact between East and West. The images produced by Iranian photographers during this period complicate the postcolonial argument that „indigenous“ forms of representations are always on the side of resistance. This becomes most evident in erotic images of Iranian women. While these pictures did incorporate Orientalist imagery, they also integrated non-western symbolic elements and took up local standards of beauty. A similar dynamic holds true for Iranian private family pictures. As Behdad pointed out, Iranian men actively adopted the medium photography to conjure an image of modern subjectivity that emulated European traditions of male self-representation. In contrast, women were intentionally held away from the gaze of the camera or at times erased from the pictures. The adaptation of the „Western“ technology photography in nineteenth and early twentieth

century Iran thus reaffirmed traditional social values and the patriarchal order of Iranian society.

In the first section entitled „Knowledge, Myth, Error,“ GUNLÖG FUR (Linnaeus University, Sweden) asked for ways to access the intersections, imbalances, and connections that go hand in hand with cultural encounters. Using the concepts of margins and marginalization she analyzed accounts of the encounter between Swedish and Saami people in eighteenth century Scandinavia and between Native Americans and European settlers. As Fur argued, there is a need to go beyond the established colonial framework in European descriptions of encounters with the so-called „others.“ Instead of subscribing to dualistic descriptions of cultural interactions, scholars should attempt to access the complexity of lived experience of past generations and provide alternative and differentiated interpretations of their cultural relations. Fur suggested to develop a stronger sense for the fragmentedness of the „evidence“ – whether textual or other – growing out of cultural contact situations.

Following the myths of cultural contact, LAWRENCE G. DESMOND (Palo Alto, USA) analyzed the controversial scholarly debate on the development of Maya civilization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In this debate, many scholars argued that migrants from Egypt or from the lost continent Atlantis must have contributed to the development of early American cultures in the attempt to explain the Mayas' rich cultural heritage. In his talk, Desmond criticized the 1970s books of the American archeologists Robert Wauchope and Robert L. Brunhouse on this debate. While both authors pointed to several flaws in past theories on Mayan civilization, their criticism tends to be directed against the personalities of past archeologists such as Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon. Desmond's presentation suggests that the fierceness of the attacks on the pseudoscientific theories of late nineteenth-century scholars articulated a deep-lying fear of more recent findings and theories that subvert the ideologically comforting orthodoxy of the Behring Strait thesis.

The second section analyzed the different

forms of knowledge production on German colonialisms in Eastern Europe and Africa. LIINA LUKAS (Tartu, Estonia) examined colonization narratives in Estonian and Baltic-German literatures. As she showed, the colonization and christianization of Old Latvia during the twelfth century is a key event in Latvian cultural memory and a central theme of the Baltic-German literary works. Using the example of *"The chronicle of Henry of Livonia"*, Lukas argued that Baltic-German literary works, though today little known outside the Baltic states, have been instrumental for past attempts to explain and justify the colonization of the Baltic area and legitimize the German presence in the Baltic territories.

DANIEL J. WALTHER (Waverly, USA) examined the recent historiography on German colonialism in Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He proposed to use the analytical perspectives of Ronald Robinson, James Scott, and Detlev Peukert to examine different forms of non-conforming behavior in colonial settings. Such a perspective, Walter argued, would allow us to gain glimpses into the quotidian experience of colonial encounters. In the ensuing discussion, several participants expressed their discomfort about the recently revived, often uncritical, interest in German colonial history. They emphasized the need for historians to counter nationalistic narratives of German colonial history and include the perspectives and voices of the colonized in their accounts.

The third section on „East-Western Knowledge Transfers and Blockages“ opened with a talk of SANJAY SETH (London) who analyzed the colonial discourse on Indian education during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. During this period British colonists began to voice concerns about the allegedly declining moral state of the educated Indian subjects. As Seth argued, this Western notion of a moral crisis resulted from the assumption that such central Western categories as religious belief, selfhood and consciousness were universal anthropological categories while they are in fact incompatible with Hindu religious and philosophical thought. However, some members of the Indian educated classes did indeed experience identity

incongruities due to their position in-between the moral codes of Western thought and the traditional Hindu life-world. The introduction of Western knowledge in colonial India thus led to conflictual self-positions that were shaped by notions of deficiency and inconsistency.

While Seth focused on the contradictions between different forms of knowledge, STEPHAN KLOOS' (Wien) talk on Tibetan medical knowledge asked what happens when knowledge becomes „fugitive.“ As Kloos showed, the bloody defeat of the Tibetan Rebellion during the late 1950s resulted in the destruction, disruption and dispersal of Tibetan medical knowledge. But instead of disappearing, Tibetan medical knowledge subsequently became framed by a discourse of cultural survival. According to Kloos, this discourse continues to shape the efforts of Tibet's exile government to preserve and distribute this knowledge and gain its cultural recognition by India and Western nations.

The next day's morning section focused on the elusiveness of knowledge in Latin American settings. NEIL SAFIER (Vancouver, Canada) scrutinized the early history of the Amazon region. As Safier argued, the Amazon region was a complex contact zone where indigenous populations traveled and left multiple traces in the landscape. By presenting different kinds of material evidence (literary, ethnographical, archaeological and cartographic accounts and artifacts), Safier recovered the deep and multi-layered legacy of indigenous civilizations in the Amazon region. The existing archaeological evidence shows that indigenous people changed their natural surroundings on a broad scheme for a much longer period of time than usually thought. It thus challenges the accounts of nineteenth-century European travelers and scientists, who pictured the Amazon region as a mystic place lacking any traces of human civilization. Safier expressed the need to bring non-scriptural artifacts into the analytical picture and conduct more transdisciplinary work to recover the earth's cultural, archaeological, and geological record of human habitation.

RYAN KASHANIPOUR (Flagstaff, USA) analyzed a long-forgotten text of Fray Manuel Antonio de Rivas that was written in 1775

in Yucatan and later confiscated by the Inquisition during prosecutions against the author. The text tells the futuristic story of a journey to the moon in the year 2510, which is inhabited by a moral, egalitarian, and civilized society. As Kashanipour showed, the tale serves as a mirror for the bureaucracy and antiquated ideologies of Spanish colonial society. While Rivas was highly critical of the moral and sexual breaches of Spanish missionaries, he valued traditional forms of knowledge such as the Mayan language and praised the potential of modern sciences. The subsequent discussion focused on the question how Rivas' work might have been influenced by the geographical and social setting of Yucatan that served as a bridge between different colonial spheres during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

PEDRO DE LUNA (São Paulo, Brazil) presented the forgotten work of the Danish naturalist Peter Wilhelm Lund (1801-1880). During the 1830s and 1840s, the botanist and paleontologist Lund excavated thousands of fossils and several fossilized human skeletons in southeastern Brazil. His goal was to prove the catastrophism theory of George Cuvier, who argued that the extinction of past species was the result of a major catastrophe that ended life on earth before new forms of life emerged. While his findings contradicted Cuvier's theory and anticipated evolution theory, Lund remains largely unknown up until today since he lost priority on almost all the descriptions of the found Pleistocene species to Charles Darwin and decided against a publication of his findings in the leading journals of his time. Lund's case suggests the importance of scientific communication networks for getting one's work accepted as „knowledge“ in the first place.

The contributions to the conference's last section analyzed the entangled historiographies of the United States and Latin America as an embattled site of knowledge production. VICTOR HUGO ACUÑA ORTEGA (Managua, Nicaragua) scrutinized the history of U.S. filibusterism in Nicaragua and Costa Rica. In the mid 1850s, a group of mercenary soldiers – so-called filibusters – went to Central America under the command of William Walker to instill insurrections against several Central

American governments and foster U.S. economic ties to the region. While these events have been largely forgotten and overlooked in U.S. historiography, they play a central role in the histories of Central American countries. As Acuña Ortega argued, the failure of Walker's mission prevented filibusterism to assume its proper place in U.S. history.

RICARDO DONATO SALVATORE (Buenos Aires, Argentine) analyzed the work of leading U.S. scholars who directed their research to South America during the first half of the twentieth century. While these scholars came from different disciplines such as geography, political science, history, sociology and archaeology, they produced a form of imperial knowledge that was used to foster U.S. hegemony in the sub-continental region. One exemplary proponent was Hiram Bingham, who – with the help of native informants – brought the Inca site Machu Picchu to international attention in 1911. As Salvatore showed, while the production of knowledge on South America was largely based on the information of native experts, the generated knowledge came to be used as a tool to enlarge United States influence in the region.

The FINAL DISCUSSION reflected on the multiple causes for the dispersal of knowledge in cultural contact zones. The presentations showed that knowledge is not stable but subject to change, re-appropriation, loss, destruction, fluctuation, and dispersal. The term „fugitive“ allows one to grasp this dynamics of knowledge production during and after periods of cultural encounter. Yet the conference title “Fugitive Knowledges” was also critically discussed as giving too much agency to knowledge – as if knowledge was not the product of human interaction and power relations. It also tends to discount the fact, which became evident during the symposium, that apparently lost knowledge has been and can be preserved and might re-enter the scientific field if the context is favorable. The discussion showed the need for critical assessments of the very concepts that are used while investigating cross-cultural phenomena as those are often intricately tied to Western conceptions of identity, truth, scientificity, rationality, and the like. Many papers emphasized the crucial importance of *reading* the “traces” of

cross-cultural knowledge formation to avoid the ideological constructs of colonial science.

The symposium powerfully demonstrated how knowledge produced in cultural contact zones may travel, get lost and be rediscovered – depending on the changing politics of knowledge. While knowledge is often subject to becoming co-opted by hegemonic power structures, it is just as certain that alternative forms of knowledge arise in order to challenge and resist such inclusion.

Conference Overview:

Opening remarks

Hans-Jürgen von Wensierski, Dean of the Philosophical Faculty, Rostock University

Klaus Hock, Chair of the Graduate School „Cultural Encounters and the Discourses of Scholarship“

Gesa Mackenthun, American Studies

Keynote Address

Ali Behdad (Los Angeles): Contact Vision. On Photographic Transculturation

I Knowledge, Myth, Error

Chair: Nadine Söll

Gunlög Fur (Linnaeus University): „But in itself, the law is only white“ – knowledge claims and universality in the history of cultural encounters

Lawrence Desmond (Paolo Alto): False views and lurid epochs: Blocking the path of scientific error and opening the path to historical myth

II German Colonialisms: Rights and Texts

Chair: Theresa Elze

Liina Lukas (Tartu): „Who holds the right to the land?“ The Settlement Narratives in Estonian and Baltic-German Literatures

Daniel Walther (Iowa): The Historiography of German Colonialism and Reading the Marginalized in Colonial Texts.

III East-Western Knowledge Transfers and Blockages

Chair: Jacqueline Hoffmann

Sanjay Seth (London): Western Knowledge and Indian Objects: The ‘Crisis’ of the Educated Indian

Stephan Kloos (Wien): The Politics of Preservation and Loss: Tibetan medical knowledge in exile

IV Elusive Knowledge in Latin America

Chair: Timo Schulz

Neil Safier (Vancouver): Fugitives to El Dorado: The Early History of an Amazonian Myth

Ryan Kashanipour (Flagstaff): Morality of the Moon: Fray Manuel Antonio de Rivas’ Syzigi-as y cuadraturas of 1775

Chair: Silke Hoklas

Pedro Luna (São Paulo): Peter Wilhelm Lund (1801-1880) - A Forgotten Danish Naturalist or the Father of Brazilian Paleontology?

V Embattled Historiography: The United States and Latin America

Chair: Andreas Beer

Víctor Hugo Acuña Ortega (Managua): Histoire croisée of the United States, Nicaragua and Costa Rica: The Historiographies of the War Against the Filibusters of 1855-1857 (19th - 21st Centuries)

Ricardo Donato Salvatore (Buenos Aires): Between the Big Stick and the Good neighbor. U.S. Scholarly Engagement with South America, 1900-1945

Final Discussion

Discussant: Susanne Lachenicht, Bayreuth

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