

THE IDEA OF TRANSLOCALITY ON KRYMSKÁ

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Contribution to “Poetics and Translocality”, panel discussion with Donna Stonecipher, Louis Armand and Megan Garr, led by David Vichnar, at the Prague Microfest, organized by Louis Armand, 14 May 2011.

I'll begin with a disclaimer. A few of you may have read an essay that I wrote about four years ago called “Translocal Underground: Anglophone Poetry and Globalization”, and what I'm going to be saying here is in some respects a re-hash of what I wrote then, plus one or two new things.

I'm going to briefly look at where the term “translocality” comes from, and how it's been used in different fields up to now, and then look at the question of “what is, or what might be a translocal poem”, and then I'll try and suggest why this might be important, ending extremely briefly with the now former bookshop, bar and reading space, Shakespeare and Sons, on the Prague street of Krymská.

So I haven't spent months checking library databases, but there seems to be some consensus that “translocality” as a term was first used by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, who's originally from India, and has lived and taught for many years now in the US. And he first used the term in the mid-nineties to describe the way that groups of migrants – specifically Mexicans in the US – keep up their cultural traditions and contacts in a new setting.

And it might be interesting for poets to note that the term originally comes from an anthropologist. To my mind anthropology is the academic discipline which in its methods and concerns comes closest to poetry, at least as I conceive of it: observation, interest in details, symbols, images and narratives, concern with the precise meaning of words, acknowledgement that the findings are subjective, incomplete and open to reinterpretation.

In the academic sphere the term “translocality” has been picked up by other people in the social sciences and humanities, often as a way of focussing on processes that can't be adequately described in terms of the history or the society of a particular national state. So it's a way of crossing borders in your thinking.

The first time that I came across the term was looking at some posters at the *Zentrum Moderner Orient* in Berlin, which is an institute that does research into the interconnections between Asia and Africa, and they now have a huge 450–page book out which is called – and the precise title is interesting here – “Translocality: The Study of Globalizing Processes from a Southern Perspective”. It’s about 120 Euros, so it’s maybe one to get out of the library, but it’s got fascinating chapter headings such as “Globalisation in the Making: Translocal Gendered Spaces in Muslim Societies” and “Mapping the Ocean: Visual Representations of the Indian Ocean in the Swahili Military Press during World War II”. The introduction to the book refers to the “quest to understand how different parts of the world have been interconnected”, and actually sets up translocality more or less as an opposing term to globalization.

Moving towards poetry now, literary scholars have picked up the term. Next week in Stockholm there’s a conference on “Dislocating Literature. Transnational Literature and the Directions of Literary Studies in the Baltic Sea Region”, including a paper on “Dislocation Trauma in the Folklore of Lithuanian Deportees in East Siberia, 1940s–1960s”. I’m cheating here because the conference is based around the terms “transnational” and “transregional” – I’ll be touching on the problems of terminology in a moment.

The term has also been used in geography, and in relation to visual artists and the networks they form (there’s an essay on this that I know Megan has referred to), political activism especially in relation to migration and – in scare quotes “globalization”– and of course to the internet and the ways in which it has changed our ideas of space.

The term’s also been picked up by Anglophone poets in continental Europe including Megan Garr and me. Which brings me then to the question of “what is, or what might be, a translocal poem?” For reasons which I hope will become evident, I think that’s a more productive question than for example “Who is a translocal poet?”, which I hope I can demonstrate slightly misses the point.

So what is, or what might be, a translocal poem? I’m going to sketch out some of the answers which I think could be given to that question, along a kind of spectrum. At one end, we have what I would call the descriptive answer – very broad, open and inclusive. At the other end of the spectrum we have what I would call a programmatic answer – more subjective, more restrictive, probably more political and probably more interesting.

I’ll begin with the broadest, most descriptive kind of answer to the question. And the answer is: a

translocal poem is a poem which in some way spans more than one place.

Now this definition can be probably be applied to practically any poem that has ever been published, broadcast or read in public. With the exception perhaps of a Zen Buddhist haiku poet composing and uttering their poem to an audience at one and the same moment, the precise place where a poem was written and where it gets read or heard and has an effect are likely to be different.

So that may sound so broad as to be useless as a definition, but I think it does demonstrate that translocality is a quality potentially inherent in a lot of places rather than a label that can only apply to a few select, marginal, unusual phenomena. David and me were having an email discussion this week about whether there's such a thing as Czech translocality – we might go into that later.

Narrowing things down a bit more. Translations I think are by their nature translocal – clearly a translation will often be read and have an effect in a different place to the poem's original context. I think many people here would agree that when a poet moves to a different place, perhaps a different country, it's likely to have some kind of effect on their writing. And we might want to call that effect translocal. And just to get all Romantic, with a capital R, for a moment, the imagination – or some decent research – can take you quite a long way from where you're physically located as a poet. The English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example didn't, as far as we know, live in Xanadu before writing “Kubla Khan”.

So if you look at the entirety of poetry going on now or at the entirety of poetry over history, it's really not very hard to find what I would call “generalized” translocality.

Which moves us along the spectrum to more programmatic answers to the question of “what is a translocal poem?” And I'd like to remind you again of the other areas the terms been used in, including anthropology and history, and the quote from that introduction I mentioned before: “the quest to understand how different parts of the world have been interconnected”.

And I think you can find poetry now which knowingly or unknowingly responds to this. I'll throw out some examples here which you might or might not know – I'd hope you'll be able to fill in some more from your own reading. Andrea Brady's verse essay “Wildfire”, which among other things looks at the history of chemical weapons in different places; Kelvin Corcoran's poems based around Greece – Kelvin has been called “Britain's best Greek poet” – very translocal I think; some poems

by Maurice Scully, who's reading here on Monday, relating Ireland and Lesotho; and going back a bit, Elizabeth Bishop's Brazil poems. These are all poems which to my mind respond to the beyond. And on its own terms – without exoticising it.

Those are all examples from Anglophone writing of course. My googling of poetry and translocality has revealed that research has now been done into the poetry of migrants from the Chinese countryside into the big Chinese cities. And I can tell you from my own experience in China that the countryside and the city in China are two very different places.

So why does any of this matter? Well, I can think of at least five interrelated reasons.

The first is that of terminology. I hope it's clear by now that there's a phenomenon out there, and it would be nice to have a good name for it. There are several other terms which have been used in the past, all of which are either too limited, or have dodgy pasts. I shall run through them now, taking potshots at them.

“Ex-pat” – as Cathy Hales once pointed out to me, the term “ex-pat” is negatively defined. You're ex-patria, outside of your patria, your home country, rather than inside the country you live in. And I think translocality encompasses a lot more experiences than just the ex-pat one.

“Cosmopolitan” is the name of a great book of poems by Donna Stonecipher, but it implies that you can be at home everywhere. Personally, I'm not. I feel at home in more than one place, but that's not the same thing as being at home everywhere.

“Transnational” and “international” both put too much emphasis on the idea of the nation which I think is unfortunate.

“Intercultural” also has too much baggage to it. It makes me think of “intercultural communication”, which as an academic discipline is on a rather shaky foundation.

“Exile poetry” – well, clearly there really are exiled poets, but we're not them. I think exile poetry is a kind of translocal poetry, and not the other way round.

“Travel poetry” – you know I've lived in Berlin for about 18 years now – if I write a poem about Berlin, it's not a travel poem.

So translocality seems to me to be the most inclusive and least tainted term here.

Related to this – there are some poets who sometimes respond in a negative way to translocal poetry, without calling it that. The most famous one for Brits will be Philip Larkin with his infamous quote: “No one needs any more poems about foreign cities.” Thanks Phil. I think the term translocal poetry is good propaganda.

Thirdly, to slightly rephrase Auden: Poetry doesn't make an awful lot happen. But I think translocality is a useful concept against nationalism. It's a way of looking at poetry that is not nationally determined.

The fourth reason is the specific situation of, for example, Anglophone poets living in continental European countries – which has its own peculiarities, perhaps problems:

- Who are you writing for?
- Do you have an audience?
- How are you going to make contacts in your home country?
- Is anybody going to understand you if you write a poem about smažený sýr?

One term for this would be “paranoia”. Another might simply be “discomfort”. And I think it's good to have a positively laden or at least neutral term for this.

My very last point follows on from this, and here I'd like to thank Louis for pointing me towards a long essay by Derrida called “Monolingualism of the Other”, which argues that on one level at least – we'll forget Chomsky for a moment – language comes from outside of us. Its specific words, phrases and genres, all the baggage of history that you get with language, is learnt from the outside. Which is kind of alienating.

Now this applies to everyone. Which may mean that the anxiety which some translocal poets feel doesn't actually come from their specific situation as translocal poets. It's the other way round. The translocal situation brings out something – an alienation from language – which actually affects everyone. It just makes it clearer.

All of which means that the next time you find a poet – Czech, Anglophone, Russian or otherwise – getting drunk at Shakespeare and Sons: don't worry, be translocal. And at that point I shall shut up. Thanks.