

# TRANSLOCALITY

## An essay based on a panel with Beverley Butler, Banu Karaca, and Paola Ivanov

by Katarzyna Puzon

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### By way of introduction

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The impulses and intentions behind diving into the concept of translocality as part of our collective **otherwising** (see Macdonald, this volume) were informed by current discussions on mobility and migration, as well as my own research and practice, both within and outside museum and heritage contexts (Puzon 2016; 2017). Although translocality is not necessarily a widely used concept by museum and heritage scholars and practitioners – and is a relatively new approach – it seems to fit into the ongoing debates. This is exemplified in the theme of the 4th Biennial Conference of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies.<sup>23</sup> The organising committee have selected *Heritage Across Borders* as a guiding concept to think about and through borders, broadly understood, in relation to the role of heritage in today's world. The aim is to reflect upon recent and future attempts at 'transcending boundaries' and 'crossing frontiers' of different kinds within heritage studies, and to look into other ways of thinking and doing museums and heritage that surpass divides, such as east-west, tangible-intangible or rural-urban.<sup>24</sup>

In that vein, this essay deals with the binary conceptions of the local versus the national or the global, as well as seeking to move beyond the understanding of translocality as a type of transnationalism. My contribution offers a critical reflection on the concept of translocality and asks how it can be useful for the current museum and heritage transformations, and

whether translocality opens new avenues for re-thinking museums<sup>25</sup> and heritage, and if so, how. Addressing a variety of ways in which translocality is manifested in the movement of people, objects, practices, and discourses, I draw attention to the salience of socio-spatial dynamics and the promise of thinking with scale about museum and heritage developments. Translocality brings together the local (broadly defined), the national and the global, along with their various interconnections and interactions. And in this respect, my concern is also with how translocality can enable a non-Eurocentric understanding of museums and heritage, and in what ways it opens up space for multiple articulations of movements.

Based on a panel with three invited scholars whose work spans East Africa, Egypt, Germany, Jordan, Palestine and Turkey, this essay puts forward a set of ideas that I have found useful in thinking about and with translocality. It is not intended as a review of scholarship on the concept.<sup>26</sup> I engage in ruminations about translocality that centres on movement and captures overlapping locales or localities, rather than situating certain phenomena either 'here' or 'there'. My contribution probes into its meaning and possible use as a theoretical tool and a methodological approach, in particular in museum and heritage developments, including the field sites of my ongoing research.

# Translocality as a heuristic concept

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The translocal approach holds the potential to challenge a fixed idea of location and to enliven local-local connections and place-to-place relationships, as does the transcultural in relation to the notion of culture. There are, however, various understandings of what translocality might actually imply. For example, Clemens Greiner and Patrick Sakdapolrak (2013: 380) look at it as “an approach in its own right” that builds upon transnationalism, and so does Katharyne Mitchell (1997) who puts special emphasis on the agency of places and spaces in mobility practices, as well as their relational dimensions. Translocality is considered by some as a kind of transnationalism that although it does not centre on the nation-state, it nevertheless includes a transnational perspective. Peggy Levitt sees it as

critical to examine how these [i.e. transnational] connections are integrated into vertical and horizontal systems of connections that cross borders. Rather than privileging one level [for example the local] over another, a transnational perspective holds these sites equally and simultaneously in conversation with each other and tries to grapple with the tensions between them (2004: 3).

By questioning place-boundedness, translocality strives to reconcile rootedness with mobility. In this vein, British geographers Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta (2011) define it as a place-based concept reflected in *groundedness* during movement. They discuss translocality as “simultaneous

situatedness across different locales” (ibid: 4) that encompasses both situatedness and connection to other locales or localities and entails ‘being’ in several places and spaces at the same time. This involves a multi-scalar take on the concept that is not restricted to the national. Still, it acknowledges its presence and importance, and as such, includes inter-regional and inter-urban movements as well as those within a city or a neighbourhood. Adopting scale, both as a category of analysis and a category of practice, helps to avoid the pitfalls of flattening place, space, and time.

Some scholars make a distinction between the prefixes ‘trans-’ and ‘inter-’, the former implying ‘within’ or ‘across’, the latter suggesting ‘between’. This differentiation regards ‘trans-’ as having a more transformational character (e.g. Munkelt et al. 2016). ‘Trans’ words bring to the fore the notion of fluidity, and unpacking the prefix ‘trans’ indeed provides some productive insights. It connotes the notion of transfer, moving across or going through. It is also associated with a change from one form or condition to another, as in the case of transformation or transition. ‘Trans’ as used in ‘transgender’ encompasses these two interpretations by bridging being across and in-between, as well as belonging beyond the dichotomies. In addition, it deals with body in terms of scale, as a location of transgression and a locality of difference. Through the lens of translocality, one views, I contend, multifarious interconnectedness and interdependence of spaces, places, and scales. This includes an important role of the concept of engagement, the subject of one of the symposium

panels (see Engagement, this volume), as an essential dimension of transformative processes.

While the primary focus of translocality seems to be on space and place, it is also concerned with time and particular moments of situatedness, connections and movements, which refer to both mobility and the consequences thereof. Contextualisation remains a key attribute of any anthropological endeavour. The concept's use and usefulness is of course contingent upon context that is geographical and historical, spatial and temporal. In addition, it is not just about whether it is applied, debated and thought through in museums or heritage, but also what these museums and heritage are, as well as when and where these developments unfold.

Translocality has been frequently connected to globalisation processes,<sup>27</sup> which manifest, as Anthony Giddens notes,

the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa (1990: 64).

Such processes are part and parcel of what Doreen Massey (1993) calls the “power-geometry” of global flows and movements whereby the “time-space compression” exposes difference and differentiation that accompany them. While Massey examines how the capacity of the mobility of social groups and individuals are connected to a

position of power, the concept of “power-geometry” applies to knowledge production too, and highlights how some discourses and practices travel freely whereas others have limited power to do so. This shows how movements are also about the dynamics that reflect power relations interwoven into mobility, which is in turn linked with the position in which people, objects and knowledge are placed, often in distinct and differentiated ways, within and in relation to these flows and interconnections.

The aforementioned approaches have their possibilities and limitations, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Thus, rather than adopting one particular perspective, what interests me is both mobility and the tensions between order and movement (see also Freitag and von Oppen 2010). I do not see translocality as a unidirectional phenomenon, that is, movement from one place to another, but rather as embeddedness in more than one location. In other words, I am interested in the ways in which people, practices, objects and ideas are located – or locate themselves – in “networks of movement, communication, and imagination” (Bowen 2002: 9).<sup>28</sup>

# Translocality in museum and heritage contexts

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Mapping productive tensions between translocality and museum and heritage developments, the concept of translocality takes as a point of departure mobility rather than stasis. Also, by means of translocality, I direct attention at scale as fluid and fixed at the same time. It brings to the fore spatial dimensions and applications of museum and heritage practice by asking how museums and heritage are shaped, reconstructed and transformed via the mobility of people, ideas, artefacts, and discourses.

Within museum and heritage contexts, this notion often conjures up displacement or dispossession, which links it to debates on restitution and provenance – the concept discussed by Larissa Förster (see Provenance, this volume). Along these lines, art historian Bénédicte Savoy formulated the rationale of her current project entitled *Translocations. Historical Enquiries into the Displacement of Cultural Assets* and based at Technische Universität Berlin. Conceptualising translocations in terms of “displacements of cultural assets”, the project centres on “the actual phenomenon of the transfer itself”<sup>29</sup> from a historical perspective (2016: 2-3).

Justifying the need for such examination, Savoy posits that

the field of translocations as such – that is, not the history of the transferred object, but the actual phenomenon of the transfer itself, with all its traumas, discourses, actors, gestures, techniques and representations – has hardly been recognised, and certainly not fully researched (ibid: 3, emphasis in original).<sup>30</sup>

Holding the promise to address the dynamics that reflect power relations interwoven into mobility practices, translocality deals with the interplay of the local and the global. Such an approach implies an attempt to include flows and movements, including their effects, in the museum and heritage context. Looking through the lens of translocality, I suggest, might be useful to examine not only the circulation of ideas and concepts, but also gaps and silences that occur as a result of these movements and flows, often represented as a rather sanitised history, largely devoid of what could be considered “difficult heritage” (Macdonald 2009). Such endeavours exemplify an attempt to ‘anaesthetise’ the complex history of interactions and relationships between the so-called west and non-west (see also Winegar 2008). In this vein, the translocal approach might engender alternative historiographies and it can also contribute to silencing some phenomena by amplifying mobility and silencing the unfavourable effects of those particular movements, for instance in the contexts in which violence is

central to the displacement of people and artefacts.

Given the growing presence of the digital in museum and heritage practices, it is also important to include the role of new media as a vital contribution to this discussion and examine how this yet another scale of locality adds up to the reconceptualisation of locality and a multi-scalar understanding of translocality. Rather than reinforcing the binary of the real and the virtual, I see the potential in translocality to explore the interdependency and dialectics of online and offline contexts.

As CARMAH's *Making Differences* project demonstrates, translocality seems to be embedded in our current research on museum and heritage developments in Berlin. Here researchers investigate processes happening simultaneously at different locations in one city, albeit not only. This involves new media and digital technologies too, as it is explored by Christoph Bareither and Nazlı Cabadağ whose work falls within the Media and Mediation research area of the *Making Differences* project. Dealing with the ways in which Islam is constructed through museum work and heritage-making, my research is situated within and across places, spaces, and scales. It thus exemplifies a multi-scalar and multi-sited examination of museum and heritage developments in Berlin, which encompasses the Museum of European Cultures, a neighbourhood, urban and national institution, and local actors operating within one district, such as the Neukölln Museum. And in this sense, I see translocality also as a methodological approach.

I could not agree more with Michael Lambek who argues that

the novelty of translocality should not be exaggerated any more than the polyphony of tradition should be overlooked (2011: 3).

All the same, examining museum and heritage transformations through the lens of translocality enables to map out productive tensions as well as expose and recognise translocal dynamics and manoeuvres that are inscribed in those tensions and transformations.



Figure 1 Kunstasyl's exhibition *daHEIM: Einsichten in flüchtige Leben* at the Museum of European Cultures. Photograph by Katarzyna Puzon.

# Session contributions and discussion

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With the aim of discussing the concept of translocality as part of the Otherwise symposium, I invited scholars whose work revolves around the questions of displacement, dispossession, mobility, and translocality. The session was conceived as an invitation to critical reflection upon the concept, both its limits and its possibilities, as the speakers' contributions sought to illustrate. The panel asked, among other questions, how "constellations of difference" (Macdonald 2016) and the production and reproduction of locality play out in the intensification of movement. And how is translocality put to work in museums and heritage, or how might it be? In what ways might translocality create new avenues for re-thinking museums and heritage?

In her presentation *Heritage Rites – Translocality, Creativity & 'Acting Back' in Refugee Camp Life*, **Beverley Butler**, Reader in the Institute of Archaeology at University College London, addressed the interrelationship between heritage and translocality in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan. She discussed heritage efficacy and how place and space play out in movement and immobility whereby translocality does not emerge solely in terms of scale and space. It thus resonates with Appadurai's definition of locality (1996: 178) as chiefly contextual and relational. In her ethnographic examples, she associated translocality with creativity and heritage rights to show how both mobility and fixity manifest in the refugee camp life. By recounting the practices of enforced displacement and "objects acting back", her contribution sought to problematise the ideas of origin, homeland, and elsewhere.

Butler argued that "everything about the Palestinian case, in a sense, tests the notion of what a refugee is, and what translocality and heritage might be." Heritage is pharmakon, as she put it using Derrida's term, and as such it can be both poison and cure.

Arguing against the opposition of the local to the national, Butler contended that "popular heritage rites" indicate the crisis of the latter. She continued by saying that these rites

emerge as significant expressions of refugee agency and as synonymous with activated heritage forms, powerful ritual acts of communion – including magical thinking and wish-fulfilment – that ultimately create new 'factness' and 'realities' on the ground.

This chimes with the view of translocality as kind of space where the ideas of the national and the local fall apart. The case of the refugee camp provides an especially thought-provoking example because "it keeps the local in the national as well as the global in the imaginary", as Butler formulated it, and exposes the simultaneity of the past, the present, and the future.

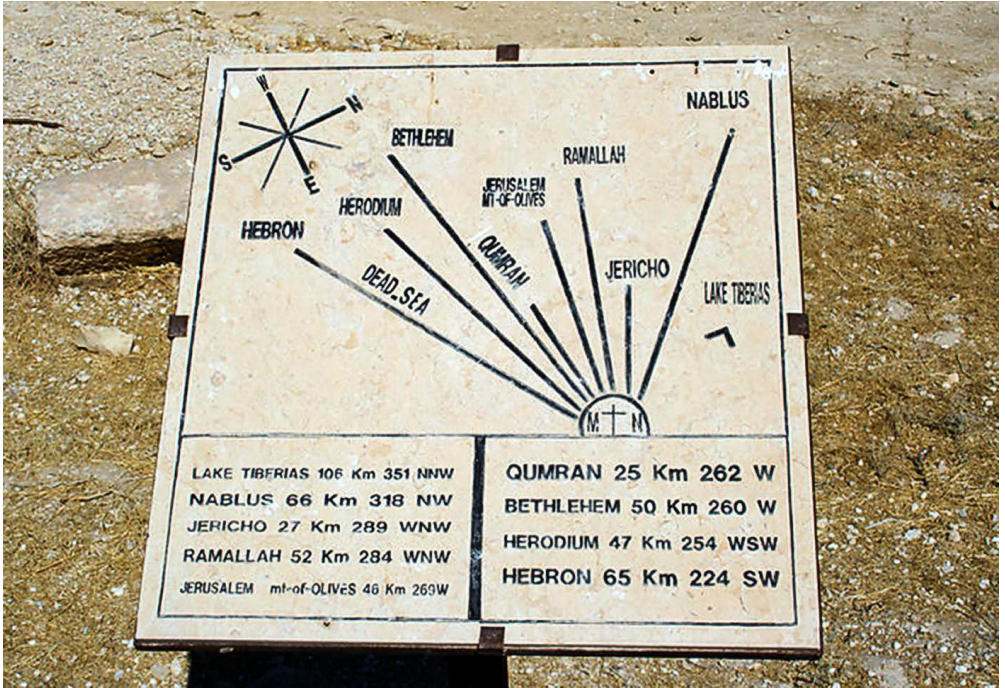


Figure 2 Photograph by Beverley Butler. Permission courtesy of the author.

The second speaker, sociocultural anthropologist **Banu Karaca** (Sabanci University), concentrated on dispossessed, lost and looted art works, as well as other cultural assets in the Ottoman Empire and the Early Turkish Republic. Her contribution drew on her project *Lost, not Found? Missing Provenance, 'Lost' Works, and the Writing of Art History in Turkey*, which probes into the distribution of those art works into the Islamic collections of different institutions in Berlin, New York, and London.

Speaking about their displacement, she asked: “what kinds of loss [do] ‘missing’ art works engender?” and “how do you sustain this economy of forgetting despite all that we know about it?”

Her presentation, *Diasporic Trajectories, Art Historical Taxonomies: Dikran G. Kelekian and Islamic Art*, focused on the Met’s<sup>31</sup> collection of Islamic art, more specifically the south side of the gallery, and the figure of Dikran Kelekian (1868–1951),



an Ottoman-Armenian art dealer and collector, and his translocal trajectories. She talked about the Damascus Room, gifted by Kevorkian, and a new room for Ottoman art, supported by Vehbi Koç, as the ones that do not address multi-religious and multi-ethnic backgrounds of those who contributed to those collections, which puts it in contrast to other sections of the museum. She argued further that

without this history being at all reflected within the museum, it produces certain silences in this physical adjacency that are really, I think, telling of the field of Islamic art and the taxonomies of Islamic art, and what they obscure in terms of their producers and their audiences at one time.

Drawing a distinction between translocality and translocation, she suggested that the translocations of art works had been embedded in state violence and the category of Islamic art had been complicit in excluding the category of Turkish art history. In this respect, the question of translocality pushes towards the process of rethinking archives and collections. It amplifies movements and silences. This holds promise to disturb certain categories, such as the one of Islamic art.

In the final panel contribution, entitled *Conceptualising and Exhibiting Translocality as a Corrective to Dominant Narrative*, **Paola Ivanov**, an ethnologist and a curator of the Africa collections at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, responded to the two

preceding speakers' presentations and offered her own reflection on the concept of translocality, both in East Africa and Germany, more specifically Berlin. In her work on the Swahili Coast of East Africa, she focused on aesthetics and translocality in Swahili and Zanzibari societies. This allowed her to approach the phenomenon of translocality as a way of living that is not that much influenced by the idea of the nation-state, as it is very characteristic of the coastal communities of the Indian Ocean. She highlighted the importance of relating translocality to other 'trans' concepts and suggested that

in the focus of the concept of translocality are not only the mobilities between localities as well as interconnections created by these mobilities, but always and at the same time, the question how locality is created in the context of interconnectedness.

Referring to Berlin's context, she maintained that museums had not sufficiently dealt with mobility. As one of the prominent exceptions, she pointed out the *Objects in Transfer* exhibition trail at the Museum für Islamische Kunst. The reasons for this status quo, Ivanov argued, is the classification system that still dominates in museums and reflects a 19th-century model of culture. She raised the salience of the current political context as another factor, in particular the reemergence of identity politics and new nationalisms in Europe, along with the so-called 'refugee crisis'. Speaking about the idea of translocality as a "corrective to dominant narratives", she emphasised its

capacity to “provincialise” the dichotomous understandings of identity and belonging and challenge them with multiple “logics of belonging”. The simplified ordering of belonging is reflected in museum practices. In one of Berlin’s museums, she mentioned, some artefacts from the East African Coast were included in the Islamic collection because they were classified as of Arab descent.

During the ensuing discussion, anthropologist **Haidy Geismar**, the keynote speaker of the symposium, addressed the close interrelationship between provenance and translocality. Juxtaposing these two concepts, she brought up for consideration the possibility and potency of their connection. Geismar put forward the term *trans-provenance* that could potentially enable us to look at origins as both fluid and evidentiary at the same time.

people move, but also how categories are disrupted. Indeed, as was addressed during the Q&A session, the challenge remains: how do we act with this knowledge? And, as Paola Ivanov added on a final note, in what ways can we make translocal concepts more accessible in museums? Discussing translocality in the anthropological tradition, Lambek maintains that it is “a product of horizon clearing” (2011: 5). Although he links it with ability to look at phenomena more broadly, rather than holding transcending qualities, the idea of “horizon clearing” could offer another starting point for discussion that would take on a different significance in the museum and heritage context, and thus potentially open new avenues to think and do museums and heritage otherwise.

## Futuring remarks

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Doing and thinking with translocality makes it possible to engage in ‘otherwising’ that might transform the ways in which museums and heritage have so far been predominantly conceptualised and practised. This is not to say that this concept holds revolutionary promise, but rather to highlight its heterogeneous potential and liberatory capacity, which does not necessarily lead to paralysis or flattening of certain phenomena, such as space and time. This conceptual exercise and the concept itself, which can and hopefully will be put into practice, have sought to bring to light not only how artefacts, ideas and

## Endnotes

23 The conference will be held in Hangzhou, China, on 1-6 September 2018. For a full description, see <http://www.criticalheritagestudies.org/hangzhou-conference/>.

24 The term *traverse* offers yet another take on this issue that will be explored in relation to mobility, heritage and postcolonialism as part of the event *Traverse Heritage: Voice, Body, Movement* at Amsterdam Museum in May 2018. This includes an interactive performance of the interdisciplinary artist collective Moving Matters Traveling Workshop, which I am a member of.

25 This concerns museum storage, too. For a recently published study on museum storage areas, see Brusius and Singh (2017).

26 For a comprehensive review paper on translocality, see for example Greiner and Sakdapolrak (2013).

27 Ulf Hannerz's research (e.g. 1998) has been concerned with placing local issues in a global context.

28 See also, for example, Leichtman 2015 and Mandaville 2001.

29 In German, it says "das Phänomen des Abtransports", which could be translated as the phenomenon of removal or relocation.

30 For a full draft, see [http://www.kuk.tuberlin.de/fileadmin/fg309/bilder/Forschungsprojekte/Translocalitions.DEUTSCH\\_WEISS\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.kuk.tuberlin.de/fileadmin/fg309/bilder/Forschungsprojekte/Translocalitions.DEUTSCH_WEISS_FINAL.pdf).

31 The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, popularly known as the Met, is one of the world's largest museums and the oldest one in the United States.

## Speaker bios and original paper titles

*Heritage Rites – Translocality, Creativity & 'Acting Back' in Refugee Camp Life*

**Beverley Butler** is Reader in Cultural Heritage at University College London. Her research focuses on critical heritage perspectives, heritage in refugee camps, 'heritage wellbeing' and transformative 'efficacies of heritage', especially in contexts of marginalisation, displacement, illness and extremis, as well as the Middle East. She is the author of the monograph *Return to Alexandria – An Ethnography of Cultural Heritage, Revivalism, and Museum Memory* (2007). Beverley is C.I. on a joint ESRC/AHRC Global Challenges Research Fund research project which looks at the role of creative arts and cultural activities in improving health and wellbeing. She is currently writing a monograph *Possessing Palestine – A Quest for the Efficacies of Heritage* (IoA/ Routledge).

*Diasporic Trajectories, Art Historical Taxonomies: Dikran G. Kelekian and Islamic Art*

**Banu Karaca** is a sociocultural anthropologist and Mercator-IPC Fellow at Sabanci University. She works at the intersection of political anthropology, art and aesthetics, nationalism and cultural policy, and museums and commemorative practices. Her manuscript *Decivilizing Art: Cultural Policy and Nationalism in Turkey and Germany* examines the entrenchment of art in state violence

based on extensive research in the art worlds of Istanbul and Berlin. Some of her recent publications interrogate the politics of intercultural exchange programs in the EU, freedom of expression in the arts, the visualisation of gendered memories of war and political violence, and visual literacy.

## Discussant

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*Conceptualising and Exhibiting Translocality as a Corrective to Dominant Narratives*

**Paola Ivanov** is an ethnologist and a curator of the collections from East, North East, Central, and South Africa at the Ethnological Museum of the National Museums in Berlin. Her research, publications and exhibitions focus on art, aesthetics, visual/material culture, museum theory, provenance research, as well as on African history and global interconnectedness. One of her main research interests is the relationship between translocality, aesthetics, and space on the Swahili Coast of East Africa. Recently she has co-edited the volume *Humboldt Lab Tanzania: Objects from the Colonial Wars in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin – Tanzanian-German Perspectives* (2018), with Lili Reyels and Kristin Weber-Sinn.

## Author and chair

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**Katarzyna Puzon** is an anthropologist and a postdoctoral research fellow at CARMAH. Her main interests lie at the intersection of heritage, memory, mobility, and the city. In her current research on Berlin, she examines the politics and poetics of representation and recognition, primarily in relation to Islam and heritage-making. Her recent publications include “Saving Beirut: heritage and the city” in *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (2017).

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