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Workshop Report | Migration, Mediality, Liminality

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In collaboration with international partners from U Michigan and U Arizona, the ScienceCampus explored how migration experiences, in the past and today, are mediated through a variety of formats, giving expression to the liminality of global and regional mobilities.



The International Workshop “Migration, Mediality, Liminality” was organized by the Leibniz ScienceCampus (University of Regensburg/IOS Regensburg) in cooperation with the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The workshop, held on 28-29 January 2021, emerged as an initiative of the ScienceCampus’ Interdisciplinary Research Module “Practices of Belonging (*Verheimatlichung*)”. The Module explores senses and practices of making and moving homes, addressing social, cultural and literary phenomena related to the politics and the representation of belonging across local and global perspectives.

The focus of the workshop was on the power of different media, such as film, photography, digital and written media, to represent mobility and experiences of migrant liminality and marginalization. The participants reflected on how media produce and condition meanings of such processes and phenomena in the interconnected European and US-American contexts. The speakers adopted a *longue durée* perspective reaching from the nineteenth century until today.

The organizers and the research module coordinators, ULF BRUNNBAUER (IOS Regensburg), VOLKER DEPKAT (UR) and SABINE KOLLER (UR), opened the event, emphasizing in their introductory statements the importance of the transnational approach in the study of the two regions, Europe (East, South and Central) and North America. They also stressed the need to address changing concepts of those regions and their multidimensional and multidirectional entanglements. The organizers conceived the workshop as a space for interdisciplinary dialogue on migration and on the aesthetic and cognitive effective power, *die Wirkkraft* in Sybille Krämer's words, that unfolds in the media that represent, shape and themselves are shaped by migration experiences. The introduction framed migration as an ambivalent and complex phenomenon that could take various forms: be it a rite of passage, a condition of in-betweenness, an activity of border crossing, of creating new communities and reestablishing the lost ones, and finally, as a condition of a radical liminality that media sometimes commodify or fail to represent.

Writers and their Itinerant Experiences

These introductory impulses were followed by the first panel, chaired by URSULA REGENER (UR). It focused on scripts and textual media from the Slavic and Jewish Studies perspective, addressing the creation of liminal spaces and notions of belonging in Yiddish narratives. MIKHAIL KRUTNIKOV (University of Michigan) presented postwar works of two Yiddish authors, Shmuel Izban (1905-1995) and Der Nister (Pinhas Kahanovitsh, 1884-1950), who thematized distinct Jewish migrant experiences in reportage. Shmuel Izban, a journalist and *émigré*, was assigned by a New York newspaper *Der Morgen Zhurnal* to cover the clandestine mission to smuggle Jewish refugees to Palestine. In 1947, he traveled with illegal immigrants on one of the *Haganah* ships that was intercepted by the British, with the refugees then transferred to a detention camp in Cyprus. Izban ended up undercover as a refugee in Cyprus where he eventually was jailed and deported to the US. His eyewitness accounts of the perils and hardships of the journey aboard as well as the internment of around 1.500 Jewish refugees in Cyprus, were published in Yiddish in 1948 in Buenos Aires under the title "*Illegal*" *Jews split the seas*. Not only does his reportage function as an exposé documenting historical events that preceded the creation of the modern State of Israel, but it also offers a literary elaboration of the Jewish dream of a national sovereignty in the context of divisive religious, political and ideological differences. The other author discussed by Mikhail Krutnikov covered a distinct episode of the Jewish migration saga, namely, a journey to the Jewish Autonomous Region (EAO), a Jewish socialist republic project at the eastern edges of the Soviet Union. In 1947 Der Nister, aka Pinhas Kahanovitsh, boarded a train in Moscow heading to Birobidzhan, the administrative center of the EAO. He travelled together with many Holocaust survivors, who would contribute to a revival of Yiddish culture in Birobidzhan. In his travel notes, Der Nister documented the journey and the "train community", interweaving it with his visions of a post-Holocaust Jewish Renaissance, the fulfillment of the Jewish desire for a homeland and a new type of communality, albeit one that was utopian and mystical in form. According to Krutnikov, Der Nister recreated the archetypical image of the Wandering Jew, yet veiled it in a reparative and therapeutic

rhetoric of Jewish agency and the reconstruction of wholeness both before and in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

The second speaker on this panel, Sabine Koller (UR), combined visual art and a text whose close reading revealed new, oblique meanings. Drawing on Victor Turner's definition of liminality and conceptualizing it within Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism, Koller laid out her analysis of three short stories by three Yiddish authors whose art of storytelling she described, following David Roskies, as acts of "creative betrayal". The context for all the three stories is the mass Jewish migration to the US from Europe, and mostly from the Russian Empire, at the turn of the twentieth century. David Bergelson's "America Two Images", Ilya Ehrenburg's "Ship Ticket" and Lamed Shapiro's "At Sea" represent the experience of migration and liminality while incorporating idealistic notions of America. Bergelson deals with the Americanization of *Shtetls*. Ehrenburg prefigures the motif of a ship ticket as a signifier without a signified, that is, without the actual ship journey, which takes on new redemptive meanings, whereas in Shapiro's story the journey itself is thematized. Referring to the latter, Koller provided extensive insight into the various levels of liminality of an immigrant on a ship deck: individual, collective and metaphysical, where the sea is the safe space in-between and the mainland - a place of sorrow. In all those stories, North America is represented as either a lacuna or an ambivalent signifier that contains a tension between belonging and rejection.

The first panel was completed by a round of questions that focused on the historical impact and materiality of newspapers, where the cited stories and reportages were printed. It was framed here as a medium that has its own inscribed liminality that circles around what is sayable and what is not, what is censored and what is not. Another question that arose concerned the tension between the representation of mobility and immobility, and the ways of creating mobility within the basic situation of immobility while aboard a ship. Mobility in this sense, as Krutnikov and Koller found, is implied in an assimilation or a transformation, and therefore in a metamorphosis which itself is not a static phenomenon. Yet another matter that was raised referred to the Modernity project in which the authors participated by building literary identity around ascriptions of trans-territorial, ex-territorial and indeed global literature. Overall, the panel highlighted various modalities of rites of passage conceived as spatial and spiritual border crossing mediated by literature in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

(Auto)Biographical Migrant Writing

The second panel chaired by GER DUIJZINGS (UR) focused on migration and autobiographical forms of writing. The speakers presented different approaches towards the analysis of autobiographical expressions. SIDONIE SMITH (professor emerita at the University of Michigan) and JULIA WATSON (professor emerita at Ohio State University) presented the core ideas of their joint research on life narratives as outlined in two of their works.^[1] Their preferred term for describing autobiographical texts is "life narrative". It was introduced as a broadly inclusive instrument to describe the practice of self-representation among many (around sixty according to the authors) different literary genres and

various media, including visual and digital media, performance and documentation. Smith and Watson's research is founded on three concepts: performativity, positionality and relationality. They all serve to theorize the axioms of writing that is based on self-representation through a multiple, complex and unstable autobiographical "I" as systematically dissected by the speakers. The relation between media, whose materiality is essential to the subject, and its (auto)biographical context are framed by the theoretical term of automediality, which effectively describes the practice of mediation and construction of subjectivity. Smith and Watson also touched on the current US-American political and social context with regard to the refugee crisis, the Trump administration's policy towards migrants, including internal migrations in the US, and national borders. Here, they also gave a glimpse into the narratives of departure, transit, arrival and settlement constructed by migrants and refugees themselves, which they also presented with regard to automediality, the use of digital devices and social media by them. The inspiring examples of automediality mentioned here include the graphic novel *VietnAmerica: A Family's Journey* (2010) by GB Tran and *An Opera of the World* (2017) by Manthia Diawara.

The second presentation in the panel was by Volker Depkat (UR). He provided a distinct perspective on migration and its records. Depkat's historical research is embedded in the history of mentalities, and draws extensively on letters, the medium of transatlantic communication of nineteenth-century German migrants to the US, who left family members and communities behind in Europe. Examining seventy-six letters written by the Eschrich-Tapert family retrieved from the Gotha Research Library (FBG) at the University of Erfurt, Depkat opted for a text-pragmatic approach that conceives texts as products of communicative acts. He thus related the content of the letters to their communicative contexts and functions, bringing the collective dimension of the letters to the audience's attention. Depkat concentrated in particular on the means of metacommunication, such as the use of *verba dicendi*, that express the tensions between writing and oral exchange, that is, vocabularies related to the act of writing, greeting, hoping, informing, inviting, expressing grievances, pleas and requests, etc. At the same time, he observed that other media, such as, pictures, newspaper clippings and magazine cutouts, were used by the immigrants as a complementary medium, enhancing the communication.

The subsequent questions addressed an issue common to both presentations, namely that of the limits of communicating the migration experience. Gender and race difference in communication as well as to the complexities of the use of a collective voice in autobiographical narratives received particular attention. In conclusion, the panel examined various forms of autobiographical writing in specific migratory and border-crossing contexts, where the life narratives of migrants and refugees are mediated not only by the discourse but also by the very materiality of the text.

Migrant Agency and its Visuality

The last panel, chaired by Ulf Brunnbauer (IOS Regensburg), took place on Friday 29 January. It addressed the images and visuality of migrant agency. VIDA BAKONDY (Austrian Academy of Science,

Vienna) presented her archival research on the work of the Serbian photojournalist Jovan Ritopecki (1923-1989), who documented Yugoslav community in Austria in the 1970s. His pictures appeared in Yugoslav, Austrian, and other international print media. One of the groups he focused on were migrant workers residing in the so called “House of Horror”, also referred to as the “Rio Grande House of Horror”, in the peripheral 23rd district of Vienna. The majority of the photos were taken indoors and depicted everyday life and activities, mostly of young Yugoslav male *Gastarbeiter*. Some of those photos, as observed by Vida Bakondy, were instrumentalized by the press and used in order to denounce the migrants’ living and working conditions. Vida Bakondy further focused on Ritopecki’s specific approach to photography, which she identified as resulting from the journalist’s intensive social interaction with the subjects of his work.

In the second part of the panel, VITA ZELENSKA (Leibniz ScienceCampus, Regensburg) continued with the subject of migration as represented in artistic expressions of solidarity with refugees in Greece in the twenty-first century. Drawing on her fieldwork conducted there in September and October 2020, Zelenska presented an excerpt from her research on knowledge production around the notion of migration. The ideas of Rosi Braidotti, Achille Mbembe and Roland Barthes provided the theoretical framework for examining bodily presence and the intersectional struggles of migrants and refugees as mediated by performative and visual art. Zelenska proposed a sonic approach towards the production of artistic space, highlighting the political agency of sound in artistic expressions that tackle the problematic of objects speaking for people in vulnerable positions. If textual and visual representations are prone to semantic voids, as previous panels showed, then it is possible, she argued, that sound could capture the in-between-character of migrant experiences.

The presentations triggered discussion of issues such as the objectivization of migrants in activist discourse and the photographer’s work. How visual arts conceptualize space was at the center of the discussion, which addressed the tensions between distancing and identification, and between normalization of the representation and the need to represent.

The US Post-Soviet Diaspora in Fiction and Reality TV

In the concluding keynote lecture, CLAUDIA SADOWSKI-SMITH (Arizona State University, Tempe) talked about the racialization and self-representation of post-1980s immigrants from the former Soviet Union to the US in reality TV and fiction. She has explored the subject extensively in her 2018 book, *The New Immigrant Whiteness*, which offers an important contribution to scholarship on whiteness and migration. The emergence of the post-Soviet diaspora in the US, its identity and culture, is an underrepresented and understudied subject. Drawing upon media and migration scholarship, Sadowski-Smith offered insight into the conundrums of media representations of race and immigration and the self-representations of the migrants who participate in reality TV programs. This format, she argued, emphasizes drama and conflict to provide maximum entertainment while at the same time giving screen time usually underrepresented social groups. This generates space for new forms of identity

formation and promotes the social upward mobility that is usually, though, framed within a myth of a white immigrant success in the US. The contemporary discourses and imaginaries connecting two distinct temporalities of two migrant histories, that of the nineteenth-century European immigration waves and of the post-Soviet diaspora are rooted in the neoliberal economy and ideology, and occur on many levels of media representation. As a counterpoint, Sadowski-Smith demonstrated examples of narrative fiction that thematize identity and the racialization of post-1980s immigration from the former Soviet Union. By contrast to reality TV, novels are a media form that relies neither on profitability nor on its appeal to larger audiences. The particularity of fiction is that it strives to represent the diversity of US post-Soviet diaspora, placing members of the group within broader contemporary US migration contexts and tackling difficult issues of both “whiteness” and “blackness” in the country.

The debate following the lecture, chaired by BIRGIT BAURIDL (UR) revolved around the concepts of liminality and diversity, which emerged as flexible categories that not only the media use and exploit but the migrant subjects themselves make use of while calling upon their whiteness, commodifying it in terms of privilege and difference, and creating their own narratives. The line between insecurity and playfulness proved to be thin and adjustable according to individual interests. A frequent amalgamation of different post-Soviet migrant groups by the media often finds its reflection in migrants’ self-inscriptions but can also be countered by them, if they deliberately or unconsciously differentiate themselves from other groups, negotiating their self-inscribed identity. It is questionable if such practice can be further empowering or if it helps us better understand the group or collective identity.

The workshop provided a space for fruitful and profound discussions on migration, media and liminality. It dealt with question of how migration and refugee experience has been mediated across various entangled US and European spaces from the nineteenth century until today. The contributors presented various readings of textual and visual representations and self-representations of migration experience and belonging. Together they suggested productive synergies with each other’s ideas and methodological approaches. The presentations raised many intriguing issues. It would be highly recommendable to continue this scholarly exchange and maintain the interinstitutional dialogue, as well as to ponder together on other contexts such as migration and liminality in the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Reference

[1] Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Second Edition*. NED – New edition, Second. University of Minnesota Press, 2010; Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader*. Ann Arbor: Maize Books, 2016.

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