

PART 2:
NEITHER HERE NOR THERE?
LOCATIONS AND ORIENTATIONS IN
CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

9. Introduction to Part 2

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How are worldly locations and orientations registered in literature? The terms “locations” and “orientations” appear, at first, to have very different qualities: a location operates as a fixed, spatial dimension whereas an orientation implies movement across both spatial and more abstract dimensions, such as ideology or identity. Yet orientation might also imply a form of vector and could be related to “disorientation”. This section posits that the two terms, “locations” and “orientations”, might, rather, be productively read as co-constitutive. That is to say, the ways literature locates itself reveals various orientations that may reinforce or, indeed, destabilise that very location. Alternatively, literary orientations, towards say, a home, a diaspora, the world, might reveal surprising aspects about how literature registers its locatedness. There is also Homi Bhabha’s (2004) concept of “the location of culture” connected to questions of national affiliation, hybridity and liminality and referring to how cultural production is the most creative when it is the most ambivalent. We wager that in attending to the centrifugal and centripetal movements back and forth between location and orientation we might mobilise insights into the ways in which the cosmopolitan-vernacular exchange operates in world literatures.

In her chapter, **Ashleigh Harris** exemplifies the dynamics between African location and global orientation by way of a close reading of the short story “How to Eat a Forest” by the Kenyan

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writer Billy Kahora. Harris considers the ways in which African environmentalist fiction orients itself both outwards (towards a global readership in the interests of mobilising an environmental politics) and inwards (towards the local scales upon which environmental depletion is most acutely felt). This has consequences for both the material production and distribution processes and the aesthetic forms of this fiction. Harris posits that the aesthetic and material innovations of Billy Kahora's multi-genre text are codetermining factors of his environmentalism. She argues that Kahora's interweaving of aesthetics and material production enables him to address both the global and local scales of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence": that is, the global forces that are decimating African natural resources and are registered, first, in the lived scales of the everyday.

In their anthropological approach to world literatures, Helena Wulff and Paula Uimonen combine participant observation and interviews with close readings of different texts. Drawing on her study of diaspora writers, **Helena Wulff's** chapter explores how they are located in Sweden, yet oriented both towards Sweden and the country of their origin. As is evident in Pooneh Rohi's novel *Araben* ("The Arab"), home can be a divided location and one's orientation towards these places might change over the course of time prompted by key events and stages in life. A young woman in the novel is from Iran, but she is so well integrated that people think she was adopted. At first, Sweden is her main location, but as the novel unfolds her orientation towards Iran becomes more important. At the same time, an older man leads his lonely life in Stockholm where he moved decades ago from Iran, and we come to understand that "the Arab" is actually Persian, but is taken to be an Arab in the Swedish context, highlighting his dislocation and feelings of homelessness. While his orientation to Iran is weaker than it used to be, he is not really oriented to Sweden either. Through their fiction and journalism, diaspora writers such as Pooneh Rohi can be said to cosmopolitanise Sweden from within.

In **Paula Uimonen's** chapter, African women writers bring attention to two interrelated aspects of cosmopolitan-vernacular exchanges in world literature: as *women* writers, their work highlights the transnational tensions of feminism, and as *African*

writers, their works exemplify the cultural construction of Africanness in a globalised world, a cosmopolitan orientation that is informed by and many times challenges the spatiotemporal ranking of Africa's place in the world, as exemplified by the Pan-African movement. With the performance poetry *Warrior Unleashed* by Zuhura Seng'enge as a point of departure, Uimonen discusses the cultural dynamics of location and orientation, from the perspective of contemporary African women writers in Tanzania. Rather than privileging African literature that circulates in the western publishing industry, this chapter focuses on the cultural circumstances of literary production within the continent. It offers a view where location is multilayered and orientation multidirectional, which is a way to capture interlocking spatiotemporal configurations in literary production.

Post 9/11 Muslim writing in English is the topic of **Adnan Mahmutović's** chapter. Now the label Muslim writing has been used primarily for authors who are openly religious while writing on topics in relation to Islam and Muslim identity. However, this excludes the cosmopolitan heritage of Islam, as Mahmutović points out. While written in radically different voices, novels by authors like Mohsin Hamid, Michael Muhammad Knight and Mohja Kahf are built around the same concern: how do Muslims find a place while constantly having to move, in the post 9/11 world? The desire to be located drives characters, and yet there is an equivalent centrifugal force of orientation: orientation outward becomes the only way of actually locating oneself. This seemingly contradictory dynamic of location-through-orientation, or centripetality-through-centrifugality, translates from the characters to the novels themselves. In other words, one cannot but ask, where do novels such as *Taqwacores*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* want to be located and what are their orientations? Applying Alexander Beecroft's theory of the ecologies of world literature, Mahmutović argues that the dynamics between location and orientation makes it possible to include variegated Muslim fictions in English in ecologies as different as national, cosmopolitan and global.

Authored by **Bo G. Ekelund**, the final chapter in Part 2 takes us to the Caribbean and a discussion about the relationship between

land, place and language strategies in fictional worlds there. As Ekelund contends, every literary work claims a territory, and in doing so it betrays an orientation. It can do so only by means of its literary language. As peripheral cosmopolitans, writers from the anglophone Caribbean have used the Caribbean vernaculars as a linguistic resource, a narrative object and a utopian thematic in order to reorganise the literary territory sustained by metropolitan and cosmopolitan markets. By looking at the English-language literature of the Caribbean from the perspective of cosmopolitan and vernacular orientations, Ekelund discusses the three modes that are informing the necessary strategies to claim place by means of language: language as personal style, as linguistic variety and as deliberate discourse. The chapter forms part of a larger study of the linguistic strategies that come into play when territory is claimed in a selection of 32 works of fiction written by authors from the anglophone Caribbean in two distinct periods: 1955–65 and 1985–95. Here, Ekelund begins to analyse the shifting orientations – towards centres and peripheries of the geopolitical world – realised by these literary works in their creation of fictional worlds.

Bibliography

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