

### **Borders in Focus: IPCS seminar and symposium 23-24 July 2015**

‘Borders in Focus’ at the Institute of Post Colonial Studies responded to recent theoretical contributions by Walter Mignolo (Border-thinking), Kuan-Hsing Chen (Asia as Method) and Sandro Medazzra and Brett Neilson (Border as Method). The public seminar **Re-thinking Borders: Inter-Asian conversations with Postcolonial Studies** interrogated the border through the lens of media and communications studies with lectures by two members of *Cultural Typhoon*, Melbourne, A/Prof. Audrey Yue and Professor Koichi Iwabuchi. They described the contribution of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies as an alternative non-Eurocentric platform for discussing changes throughout Asia. Inter-Asian and trans-Asian positions were presented as providing dialogic opportunities for interrogating other forms of imperialism related to decolonisation, de-imperialisation and de-Cold War; the three positions examined by Chen. Yue discussed her new project ‘Queering Asian immigration’ and Iwabuchi provided a general overview of trans-Asian trends in media-culture. This event and the symposium that followed it were supported by the IPCS, The Melbourne School of Design and The University of Melbourne as part of an ARC research project: *Temporal Cities, Provisional Citizens: Architectures of Internment* led by A/Prof. Anoma Pieris.

The symposium, **Border Thinking/Thinking about Borders** was more explicitly spatial, with papers grouped around three foci: confined border spaces, cross border heritage, and broader scale temporal-spatialities. All of the examples had an explicitly geo-political focus on sites of political controversy. The symposium proposed to explore how our normative interpretations of spatial phenomena might be interrogated through the border, treated as a point of enunciation and point of intellectual and creative instability. Singapore sociologist Daniel Goh commenced the symposium with a discussion of Non-Places, focusing on the Old Kai Tak Airport site in Hong Kong. He addressed the changing meanings of neglected border-lands as liminal thresholds to the city, particularly a city where civic, national and global identities are being reformulated around discourses of sovereignty. Goh’s method, which draws on Inter-Asian Studies, examines heritage contestation of urban renewal and civic planning strategies.

Three papers on intentionally punitive sites explored the violence associated with border controls, referring to theories of spatial violence. Sean Anderson and Jennifer Ferng of the University of Sydney focused on off-shore detention in Australia, particularly on the excision of island geographies under Operation Sovereign Borders. Anoma Pieris and Mirjana Ristic of the University of Melbourne read the urban morphologies of detention sites in terms of punitive grids or gated cities, respectively, focusing on Manzanar, a remote rural site Japanese-American incarceration in California, during the Pacific War (Pieris), and on the politics of refugee mobility through Melilla, a gated city in North Africa and threshold to Europe (Ristic). In each of these papers, the physical boundaries, the holding facilities and their physical location are governed by military technologies and systems that strengthen persistently racist border policies. In all three cases the evidence is limited due to securitisation of the information. The subjectivity of residents in these temporary facilities cannot be interrogated.

The papers that focused on heritage and memory offered more concrete scenarios. Alison Starr of University of Sydney examined the Cowra Japanese cemetery, the only site of Japanese interment outside Japan, as an exceptional heritage site, due to the co-location of enemy remains in adjacent cemeteries. She examined the cemetery and its inter-cultural significance in relation to current efforts to repatriate remains. Natsuko Akagawa of RMIT reviewed UNESCO's heritage-related legal instruments focusing on the Preah Vihear Temple site disputed between Thailand and Cambodia and on competing claims on the intangible heritage of the Batik tradition by Malaysia and Indonesia. Dongsei Kim of Melbourne University discussed the Korean pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale where artists and architects of Korean descent projected a borderless unity. These papers focused on different material practices where artefacts, creative works or cultural skills become central to border disputes with the potential for greater aggravation or reconciliation of hostilities. The geo-spatial containers for these artefacts vary, but their cultural ascription remains the primary determinant of heritage.

Looking more broadly at urban settings or landscapes, the understanding of borders shifts from concrete phenomena to temporal changes of specific features whether architectural facilities or natural terrain. Renee Miller-Yeaman from the University of Melbourne followed the transformation of the Maribyrnong Immigrant Hostel site as an alternative border space to Australian citizenship, located within Melbourne's urban context. Landscape architecture

scholar Lukas Pauer, currently an architect at Herzog & de Meuron Architekten, examined the means deployed by nations to establish territorial footprints across shifting geographical terrains, in particular the conflicting political claims over artificial islands in the South China Sea. Manu Sobti of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee provided a historical analysis of the borderlands of the Oxus River as it emerges through historical traces of medieval Arab invasions, as a symbolic East-West border-crossing. He presented detailed cartographic constructions of this historic passage using multimedia 'palimpsests'. Cartography emerged as the most important methodology for understanding temporally shifting borderlands raising debates on the inherent limitations of mapping.

The symposium included a paper by artist, poet and architect Alex Selenitsch from the University of Melbourne, who developed the project 'The Liminal House' for a creative practice workshop. Selenitsch discussed an approach inspired by the 1950s conceptualisation of the 'Diurnal House' and the temporal space of twilight or the Scottish 'gloaming'. The Liminal House, explored through a series of sketches, pastel drawings and models, provided a creative framework for testing various border scenarios. These had been developed dialogically by Selenitsch through discussions with colleagues, during the months preceding the symposium, and became the basis for a workshop run by him at the symposium's end. The aesthetic rigor applied in the intuitive pursuit of a line of intellectual inquiry became a model for border-thinking applicable for varied explorations of border scenarios. Selenitsch explained the thought process behind each step in a creative series where the material-temporal-spatial-experiential-physical interpretation of the liminal condition shifted with new insights. The workshop suggested how participants might creatively develop their fragmented sources to better address tangible criteria, familiar to architects, and thereby organise their loosely configured assemblages of border conditions into a more consistent spatial framework.