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Affinity Group Report: Archives in World Literature & Premodernity and World Literature



As the IWL program fully testifies, literary history is no longer seen as a narrative focusing exclusively on national literatures. Migration, new technologies of information and communication, and the fast pace of geopolitical change have turned our attention to international exchanges and the circulation of literary texts, ideas, and scholarship. Against this background, the joint affinity groups Archives in World Literature & Premodernity and World Literature scrutinized the contexts and frameworks within which literature is produced, marketed, translated, circulated, and received, but also archived, collected, repertoired, and categorized. In doing so, the group members suggested, or expressed their interest in, alternative conceptualizations of cultural phenomena at the core of current academic debates (chief among them, globalization), and tested the relevance of various concepts and methods by applying them to a whole range of objects outside or beyond their original context of production. We considered, for instance, how Western categories have been used to account for non-Western realities (and what alternatives we might envision for our work), and we asked how data collecting and mapping methods can be, or have been, adapted to the study of literature.

In this particular case, a major challenge was the merging of two very different groups. While nearly all the members of the Premodernity group were working on early literatures (from Sanskrit, Swahili, and Arabic traditions to the European cultures of the Middle Ages and Renaissance), the

Archives group, by contrast, consisted of researchers working almost exclusively on 20th century and contemporary topics. One of our challenges as a group became the search for common ground. In the very early stages of organizing the merged group, the leaders aimed at creating an increased sense of cohesion by scheduling together in the same session presentations from the Archives and Premodernity groups based on thematic affinities. The resulting common themes – Literature as (spatialized) knowledge, Literature as (national/universal) heritage, Literature and identity, Language as a site of conflict and/or dialogue, Literature and politics, Literary responses to trauma – were meant to serve not only as springboards for discussion but also as suggestions for further collaborative projects.

The first meeting started with a brief presentation of each member's background, main research interests, and reasons for choosing their particular affinity group, followed by a discussion of the concept of affinity group as well as the presentation of, and last adjustments to, the schedule. After the preliminary discussions, the first two presentations addressed the issue of the contemporary American novel as a form of (spatialized) knowledge. Trevor Jackson (Premodernity) talked about the narrative projects of postmodern writers such as Nabokov, Pynchon, and Morrison from the standpoint of the potentially productive tension between a philosophical understanding of the world and the active engagement with social realities, while Umberto Mazzei (Archives) focused on postmodernity as a new spatial paradigm and interrogated the ways in which literature maps the mutation in our perception of space. The general discussion following the presentations tackled the historical specificity of (post)modernity and the ways in which the opening up of a dialogue with premodern cultural formations might change our understanding of it. Also, a fair amount of attention was devoted to the novel as a social and intellectual archive conveying not only ideas and attitudes but also ways of “mapping” the world, and to new methodological tools designed to account for multiple temporalities and competing constructions of locality (recent developments in archeogeography, the critical and creative uses of network mapping, etc.).

During the second meeting, Laura Pereira (Premodernity) presented some of the issues she was confronted with while designing an educational website aimed at introducing late medieval literary texts to high school and university students. After detailing the influence of political and institutional factors on shaping school curricula and educational tools (the impact of European, Spanish and Galician guidelines on designing and implementing teaching materials and tools, the instrumentalization of literature as part of the “local branding”), she talked about the relevance of such projects for the current debates in the field of World Literature and suggested that websites

and databases such as this could contribute to the construction of a “global public space” of constant dialogue by means of allowing for various non-traditional ways of displaying and manipulating information. The second presenter, Mrinmoy Pramanick (Archives), provided a comprehensive survey of the systematic adoption of World Literature into Bengali by translating foreign fiction into the local language. Apart from a historical overview going from the early 1920s to the present day, his talk also included a critical discussion of the major political and institutional factors that influenced the choice of translated authors, texts, and cultures at a given moment as well as a valuable insight into the ideological background of translating and promoting foreign fiction in India, and particularly in the Bengal region. Articulated around the common theme of literature as heritage, the ensuing discussion tackled policies of education in a local/global context, literature as intercultural dialogue vs. literature as means of constructing/imposing a national/local “brand”, national canons vs. multilingual corpuses, the institutions involved in shaping our current understanding of World Literature. Also, the members pondered the possibility of using archives and databases as tools for critically engaging sensitive issues such as translation and nationalism or translation as a form of cultural and political resistance to both foreign domination and national pressures.

For the third group meeting, Anca Băicoianu (Archives) gave a presentation on Ilya Kabakov’s 2014 exhibition *Strange City*, an installation shown as part of the Monumenta project in Paris. After some introductory remarks on the meanings of the installation as an art form and its relationship with the museum environment, the presentation focused on the city as archive by reading Kabakov’s project along the lines provided by H  l  ne Cixous view of the city as palimpsest. The artist’s response to globalization, *Strange City* is at the same time a vast retrospective of Kabakov’s artistic career (i.e., a personal archive), a record of Conceptualist attitudes towards art and artworks (i.e., a “curatorial” project), and an immersive space (i.e. a “theater” of memory allowing for multiple interpretations and playing on the tension between Eastern and Western responses to the artwork). The following discussion had as a point of departure the notion of archive as artistic device, and various thematizations of collecting and archiving in contemporary East Central European literary and artistic practices. We also talked about changes in the meaning of a displaced/translated work, about borders (between fields, genres, and cultures) and border crossing, about the narrativization of space in contemporary artworks as well as about the strategies by means of which artistic utopias such as *Strange City* can function as critical reflections on political utopias.

During the fourth meeting, Mateusz Orszulak (Premodernity) presented his doctoral research on accounts by 16th-century Czech, Italian, and Hapsburg travelers to the Ottoman Empire. He considered, in particular, the impact of pre- and early modern travel literature on the construction of a European identity “before Europe.” A similar preoccupation with the relationship between literature and personal/collective identity was at the core of Mikela Lundahl’s presentation (Archives) of afropolitanism as an alternative cultural model to cosmopolitanism, and of her critical discussion of the relationship between the two. The discussions were articulated around possible definitions of “premodern globalization” and their relevance for our current understanding of globalization in relation to WL, the place of travel literature within world literature, and patterns of circulation in the premodern/postcolonial era. Political and ethical concerns pertaining to the ambivalence of the relation to the Other and to the possibility of creating and promoting non-hegemonic intercultural relations were also voiced.

During our fifth meeting, Sivan Goren (Premodernity) presented her work on the *Līlātilakam*, the first grammar written in Kerala, a region of south-west India. Her talk explored the cultural politics involved in defining an independent literary language (*‘Manipravālam’*) for Kerala in the 14th century by blending elements of the spoken language (*‘bhāsā’*) with Sanskrit. Her discussion of linguistic hybridity and the way language functioned, in this case, as a literary or cultural “declaration of independence” raised some fascinating theoretical questions for the group. Annachiara Raia’s presentation (Premodernity) was also interested in cultural or textual hybridity. Her talk focused on the oral and textual traditions that inform the Swahili poem *Utendi wa Yusufu* (*‘The Story of Yusuf’*). Comparative study of the poem’s manuscripts suggests how the poem has been shaped by its contact with Islamic, Judeo-Christian, and Persian traditions.

In our sixth meeting, Mohd Nazri B. Latiff Azmi (Premodernity) gave a presentation on the controversy surrounding *Interlok*, a 1971 novel by the Malay national laureate Abdullah Hussain that allegorizes the historical relations among the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. The novel was removed from the Malaysian secondary school curriculum in 2011, after its stereotyped depictions of these groups were deemed offensive. Azmi’s presentation explored the cultural politics that gave rise to the controversy and led to the novel’s suppression. For her presentation, Shine Um (Archives) explored universal themes in the poetry of William Butler Yeats. A lively discussion ensued, centering on problems of censorship, democratic education, cultural sensitivity, and the function of literature (particularly when it engages controversial topics) in secondary and postsecondary classrooms.

During our seventh meeting, Elizabeth Pentland (Premodernity) gave a presentation on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that explored how the play takes up some of the ethical problems that emerged from the French wars of religion in the sixteenth century. Part of a larger project that considers how English writers positioned themselves, their readers, or their audiences as onlookers or witnesses to the traumatic events in neighboring France, the talk explored this English play's engagement with issues (conscience, agency, responsibility) that were central to the Huguenot (French Protestant) resistance theories of the time. Ali Tatli's presentation (Archives) compared ideas about death and immortality in the poetry of Rumi and the 20th century Azerbaijani poet and scholar Bakhtiyar Vahabzadeh (1925-2009). Muhammet Gul (Archives) also gave a presentation on the works of Bakhtiyar Vahabzadeh, placing his career in the context of the Soviet occupation and the struggle for Azerbaijani independence. Our discussion centered on some of the ways writers have responded, directly or indirectly, to the kinds of political conflicts that marked both the 16th century and the 20th.

Our final meeting addressed some of the challenges we faced as a group of scholars with such divergent projects and interests. Despite those challenges, and the sometimes overwhelming diversity of the topics we addressed in our meetings, the participants came away with the sense of having learned a lot from each other. While we weren't always able to maintain a specialized focus on the Archive or on Premodernity, the kinds of exchange made possible by the merging of the two affinity groups may still prove useful to us as we continue to situate our work in relation to the larger project(s) of World Literature.

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