

Colloquium Group Report

“Politics, Poetics and World Literature IV” July 1-25, 2019, Harvard University

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The colloquium theme “Politics, Poetics and World Literature” proved particularly suggestive for scholars working on the ‘outskirts’ of world literature – as well as those who might have been prompted to rethink their current research projects with a view to conceptions of world/ing, cosmopolitanism, or the global by their involvement in the 9th Institute for World Literature. As a first glance at the abstracts of proposed papers in colloquium group IV revealed, many of them touched upon the category of world literature rather obliquely. Yet, as our conversations unfolded across the four sessions, a set of questions surrounding translation, postcoloniality, and the use of metaphors in the writers we study as well as in our own jargon came to resurface in every meeting and tied our seemingly disparate research interests back to these common threads.

The proposed papers were loosely grouped around four broader themes. The first section, “Poetry & Metaphor”, aimed at bringing together scholars whose work addresses historically and geographically distinct poetics and/or examines foundational metaphors. The second section revolved around genre: “World Literature and the Question(s) of Genre” conjoined projects that revise or adapt existing classifications or question the way in which generic categories are translated from dominant into more marginalized literary arenas (or vice versa). The third session, “Nineteenth-Century Contexts & Victorian ‘Ingredients’”, offered itself up almost naturally due to the participants’ concentrated interest in diverse nineteenth-century literatures or correspondences. The final session was designed to proceed chronologically into the twentieth century and trace the (dis)continuities of philosophical and literary tendencies beyond 1945 as well as encompass more recent pop-cultural phenomena.

July 2, 2019

Session 1: Poetry & Metaphor

Joseph Fritsch’s (Emory U) paper “Lyrical Arrows: Poetry’s Imperial Push” took its point of departure from Philip Sidney’s “Defence of Poesy” in the late sixteenth century. Fritsch located Sidney’s claim for poetry’s functionality and imitative structure within the civilizing imperative of imperialist discourse. He proceeded to sketch a genealogy for this idea and traced its echoes in postcolonial poetry, including the work of Derek Walcott and Christopher Okigbo. In conclusion, Fritsch proposed an understanding of “the postcolonial lyric as a form shot through with the violence of imperialism” and argued that “both form and content can be read as sites of anti-colonial resistance”.

The second paper by **Maayan Eitan** (Ben Gurion U of the Negev), “Hebrew Poetry as World Literature”, debated the extent to which Hebrew literature can be positioned as world literature. Eitan illuminated the connections between Anglophone (particularly US-American) and contemporary Hebrew poetry, which variously responds to American modernism and the avant-garde. She also showed that, in contrast to the growing sociopolitical authority and sense of cultural centrality evident in the former, Hebrew-Israeli poetry establishes for itself a “much more modest place at the margins of a minor, provincial literary ecosystem”.

Shoilee Khan (York U) presented the final paper in this first section, entitled “Metaphor as Method: How to Tell a Shattered Story”. Her evocative presentation combined approaches to representations of the extreme with a discussion of foundational metaphors (such as the tree, the wave, the ocean), used in conceptualizations of world literature. Tracing the question of how stories can respond to the horror of a world that defies a meaningful order, Khan offered a reading of Arundhati Roy’s most recent novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* to theorize both the limits and possibilities of conceptualizing metaphors.

July 9, 2019

Session 2: World Literature and the Question(s) of Genre

Nina Heydt (Johannes Gutenberg U, Mainz) opened our second session with a presentation of her doctoral project. Her paper, entitled “Prison Survival Guides: Negotiating Representations of American Identities in and out of Prison”, introduced the genre of self-help guides for ‘prison survival’ as well some of her preliminary research questions. In particular, Heydt outlined her interest in the interconnections between the opioid crisis, the legalization of medical cannabis, and mass incarceration in the United States. Illustrating her mode of inquiry with two trailers for TV documentaries that are part of her corpus, Heydt’s presentation sparked a productive discussion of how notions of survival, race, gender, discipline, and health/disease shape US-American identities.

The next presentation by **Bonaventure Munganga** (U of New South Wales) discussed “Indigenous Speculative Fiction and Ecological Consciousness”. Munganga shared insights into a chapter from his dissertation with us, structured into four parts. First, he made a case for considering the “postcoloniality” of indigenous Australian literature, arguing that it is charged with “subversion ideologies”. Second, he defined indigenous speculative fiction on the basis of existing definitions of SF, e.g. by Ursula Heise, extending these categories with a view to indigenous conceptions of “spiraling” time. His third point situated his own delineation of the genre in the field of ecocriticism. Finally, he emphasized the long history of such notions as an “interconnectedness among all beings”, as recently elaborated by Timothy Morton, in indigenous thought.

Yet another genre was introduced by **Zita Tsui Lok Tung** (City U of Hong Kong), whose undergraduate thesis looks at the ‘terrorist novel’. In her paper “Terrorism and Modern Literature”, Tsui presented two of her case studies, *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad and *How German Is It* by Walter Abish. Of particular interest to the subsequent discussion was her claim for the centrality of mediation, pondering both terrorists’ reliance on the media to enhance the ‘efficacy’ of their violent acts as well as the extent to which an assessment of who or what counts as terrorists/terrorism depends on media discourses.

A final genre was contributed by **Nihan Soyoz** (Binghamton U), whose paper examined “Modernity, Fantasy, and the Not-So-Oriental Tale”. Soyoz discussed the adaptation of François Pétis de la Croix’s *Milles et un Jours* by the late eighteenth-century Ottoman bureaucrat Aziz Efendi. The act of adaptation/translation is particularly complicated in this case by the fact that de la Croix’s own book is a loose adaptation of Turkish fairytales. In light of these trajectories of “re-adoptions and back-translations of the ‘Oriental tale’ genre into non-Western cultures”, Soyoz effectively problematized notions of origin and originality as well as realism vs. fantasy.

July 16, 2019

Session 3: Nineteenth-Century Contexts & Victorian ‘Ingredients’

Our panel on nineteenth-century (con)texts was inaugurated by **Sorrel Dunn** (Northwestern U) with a paper entitled “Stepping Forward, Stepping Aside: Wondrous Appearances in Goethe’s ‘Parabase’ and *Color Theory*”. Taking Goethe’s color theory as a starting point, Dunn made a case for considering the fundamental role of wonder (*Staunen*) in his oeuvre. Situating wonder “on the borders and limits of human intelligibility”, Dunn described Goethe’s evocation of wonder as being “at once foundational and unassimilable” to his conception of natural science. The colloquium group was particularly fascinated by her discussion of Goethe’s description of a color-shifting “ur-phenomenon”. On the basis of this example, Dunn convincingly demonstrated the liminal status of wonder between scientific and literary observation.

Staying within German nineteenth-century contexts, the presentation by **Natasha Anderson** (Johannes Gutenberg U, Mainz) examined “Personal and Political Poetics Past Borders: Nineteenth-Century Migrant Correspondences”. After briefly introducing the German immigrants Ottilie Assing (1819-1884) and Jette Bruns (1813-1899), Anderson considered their participation in “transnational networks of written communication” through the exchange of periodical articles, letters, and poems, respectively. She retraced their construction of “cross-border connections” through personal anecdotes, lyrical metaphors, and insights into their emotional lives and outlined their involvement in and reflections on abolitionism and progress in the United States at the time.

Thirayut Sangangamsakun (U of Warwick) offered “An Introduction to Basic Victorian Ingredients in the Thai Novel: How to Make a British Sausage and Black Pudding, Highly-Spiced”. Providing an insight into his doctoral work, Sangangamsakun discussed the novel *Nang Neramit (The Divine Nymphs)*, which was written by the Thai writer and translator Khru Liam and published in 1916, thus a decade before the appearance of what is widely accepted as the “first Thai novel proper”. He demonstrated this ‘pseudo-Thai’ novel’s intriguing resemblance to Victorian “mummy fiction”. Picking up on a critic’s comparison of the work to “chicken green curry pizza”, Sangangamsakun offered a reconsideration of the food metaphor(s) that could serve for an adequate description and classification of Thai appropriations of Victorian sensation novels.

The paper by **Ariane de Waal** (U of Innsbruck) investigated the process of “Constructing Whiteness in Victorian Dermatology”. De Waal gave an insight into one aspect of her postdoctoral project on the interconnections between medical and literary writings on skin in nineteenth-century Britain. She argued that the (controversial) formation of dermatology as a scientific discipline provided, amongst other things, medical evidence for the racial supremacy of white Britons, whose skin was now ‘proven’ to be more sensitive and responsive to environmental influences. As she demonstrated on the basis of an example in which dermatologists cite reports by travel writers that describe the so-called “semi-albino” inhabitants of African countries, this superiority establishes itself against the specter of an incomplete, “unhealthy”, and unstable whiteness.

July 22, 2019

Session 4: Philosophical, Literary, and Popular (Dis)Continuities after 1945

Our final session was opened by **Athanassia Williamson** (NYU) with a paper entitled “On the Border of Idealism: Skepticism and Authenticity in Emerson and Heidegger”. As Williamson explained, the idea behind the part of her doctoral project that she presented in the colloquium is to foreground the surprising resonances and uncanny resemblances that emerge from a ‘stage-managed’ conversation between Emerson and Heidegger. She especially teased out the affinities between the restlessness and skepticism that characterizes the work of these two thinkers – as well as their efforts “to keep skepticism at bay”.

Marjan Mohammadi (Northwestern U) presented on “Post World War II Persian Fiction: Mourning Salvation”. After offering a contextualization of post-1945 Persian literature, Mohammadi examined Houshang Golshiri’s novel *Ra’I’s Lost Lamb: Burial of the Living* (1978; her translation). She gave an insight into her own work in translating selected passages from the novel, highlighting problems of finding an equivalence for linguistic and grammatical particularities in Farsi. In conclusion, Mohammadi pointed to her interest in the idea of salvation, which she connected to post-1945 Iranian politics, making a tentative case for considering representations of salvation “as a response to the effects of the war, violence, and the rise of the new world order”.

The final paper in our colloquium group was contributed by **Chang Liu** (Heidelberg U): “Dump Them in China: On Musical Waste and Post-80s Generation’s Identity Crisis”. Liu introduced the practice of “Dakou (打口)”, the cutting of audio cassettes that recirculate in private music stores in China, after having been exported from the United States for recycling. Using Sun Rui’s 2004 young adult novel *Caoyang Nianhua* as one example, Liu discussed the representation of dakou cassettes and the dakou generation in post-1980s Chinese literature. He argued that dakou not merely represents an alternative and invaluable musical resource for those who formed part of the dakou generation, but also enabled them to “articulate their identity crisis in a rapidly changing world”.

Concluding Comments

Our colloquium group brought together researchers from undergraduate to postdoc levels, whose projects spanned geographical contexts ranging from the United States via Europe, Turkey, Israel, Iran, Thailand, and China to Australia, from early modern treatises to novels published in the last few years. The real benefit of this format – and the larger merit of IWL, more generally – appeared to lie precisely in this eclecticism. As the critical conversations we normally engage in – be that within our faculties or at international conferences – tend to stay within the perimeters of a geographically and/or historically circumscribed field, our engagement with each other’s work in the context of this colloquium group unearthed common concerns, contradictions, and shared contexts between literatures that are rarely considered in proximity. Working in and from diverse locales, our writing is nevertheless guided by strikingly similar considerations regarding adaptation, translation, ownership, originality, and the conceptual metaphors that we use and study. Returning to my own research into British eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing on the human skin, I will hopefully continue to keep in mind the surprising reiterations of Victorian genre conventions in twentieth-century Thai literature and the way in which skin is sometimes marked and cut in ways that are not dissimilar to the handling of dakou cassettes in 1980s China.