

REPORT

POSTCOLONIALISM AND WORLD LITERATURE COLLOQUIUM 3 THE INSTITUTE FOR WORLD LITERATURE UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, SUMMER 2017



Left to right: Moyang Li, Gerald Barr, Lea Hülsen, Nikolaj Nielsen, Lubabah Chowdhury, Molly Slavin, Shou Tianyi, Ben Holgate, Wu Peizhen, Monica Mohseni, Sushmita Sircar

Our Postcolonialism and World Literature Colloquium consisted of eleven participants from nine universities in five different countries. Each colloquium member delivered a 20-minute paper, followed by about 20 minutes of Q&A. We enjoyed four two-hour sessions over four weeks.

The papers were original, insightful, varied and a credit to the creative scholarship of all those involved. Major themes that kept recurring throughout the papers included cosmopolitanism, neocolonialism or imperialism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, migrancy and refugees, identity, the recovery of cultures, and historiography.

A consensus emerged of the various shortcomings of postcolonial theory as it stands today, with broad agreement that scholars working in this field have much to do to update theory in relation to events and views in the early twenty-first century. These include postcolonial theory having a basis in humanism, that it does not adequately address African slavery nor the recent history of China, and that it emphasises the individual over community or the collective. We also spent time in the last session discussing the need for critics of world literature to increasingly take into account literature from China, given China's opening up to foreign countries over the past four decades, China's rich and long literary history, and the country's rising importance in global affairs.

In our first session, papers were broadly themed 'finance and capitalism'. In an inter-disciplinary study, Monica Mohseni (Texas at Austin) discussed how US oil giant Standard Oil ran an education and publishing program at its oil camps in Venezuela in the 1940s and '50s in order to portray its petroleum business as being beneficial for the South American country and its citizens. Monica showed how Standard Oil was following then US President Truman's "four-point program" for American corporates to present their activities as foreign aid while undertaking imperialist exploitation for commercial profit. Building on Ricardo D. Salvatore's concept of "informal empire", Monica explored how Standard Oil effectively helped create a middle class in Venezuela that became dependent, and compliant, upon the dominating oil company, and which adhered to its message of modernity and an American way of life.

Sushmita Sircar (NYU) examined global imaginary in the South Asian Anglophone novel by focusing on Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2014), and Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* (2014), written by authors of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi origins, respectively. While the texts are partly structured as (auto)biographies and are rooted in specific historical events within national borders, they also utilize recurrent global sites. In particular, they critique the twin sites of the multinational finance company and the university, which provides both a liberal education and the transnational ideologies of either neoliberalism or communist socialism. Sushmita explained how the novels build on postcolonial national identities, suggesting a renewed importance of attention to class-based identities in imagined communities.

Ben Holgate (York) discussed whether the novel is effective in speaking to economics, politics and culture. By applying Francis Mulhern's concept of "metaculture" and "the condition of culture novel", a genre that focuses on the social order of meanings and values, he examined Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) and Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) to determine how well they depict the era of economic neoliberalism. He argued economic neoliberalism is a philosophy that has dominated political and economic debate over the past four decades.

In our second session, papers were themed 'cosmopolitanism and identity'. Lea Hülsen (Giessen) discussed three black female Caribbean writers – Beryl Gilroy, Claudia Jones and Sylvia Wynter – to show how they each reinvent the concept of humanism through their trans-Atlantic works. Lea argued that these authors, through essays, poetry, novels and plays, raised postcolonial issues in the early to mid-twentieth century, well before the discipline of postcolonial studies was formalised. The trio of women highlighted that humanism was a Eurocentric philosophy that had been shaped by white men and which did not adequately incorporate women of colour. Lea proposed that a reconceptualised notion of humanism needs to incorporate race, class and gender.

Shou Tianyi (Tsinghua) focused on Aimé Césaire's poem 'Notebook of a Return to the Native Land' to show how the author's use of the terms "tyrannical love" and "universal thirst" indicates a particular idea of cosmopolitanism. Building on Kwame Anthony Appiah's notion of cosmopolitanism, Tianyi argued that Césaire developed the concept of Negritude by viewing the world through the perspective of chaos, thereby opposing Jean-Paul Sartre's binary structure of "anti-racist racism" and further

rejecting the rationalism of European colonialism. She said the poem advocates an empathetic universality built on historical memories by which indigenous cultures remain open to dialogue with other cultures around the world.

Lubabah Chowdhury (Brown) explored representations of cosmopolitanism and worldliness in two Asian-American novels, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* (2003). Lubabah argued that cosmopolitanism as a mode entrenches Asian-American identity in an "American white-supremacist nation state". She drew on theory of cultural cosmopolitanism to illustrate how humanism derived from the European Enlightenment underpins the cosmopolitan project. By discussing the women characters in Tan's Chinese-American family and Lahiri's Indian-American family, Lubabah demonstrated that, while the respective fictional narratives suggest cosmopolitanism as a mode of empowerment for these women, the texts also reveal the limits of cosmopolitanism because the social acceptance and assimilation that these characters crave becomes a never-ending and oppressive process rather than one of liberation.

In our third session, papers were themed 'colonial, postcolonial and anticolonial'. Nikolaj Nielsen (NYU Abu Dhabi) gave an account of his new project that investigates various reasons why writers from Greenland, an autonomous constituent country within the Kingdom of Denmark, struggle to attract readers in their primary market of Denmark. Greenland's Inuit people, whose local language is spoken by about 60,000 people, must have their books translated in Danish to find readers. Nikolaj explained that contemporary writers like Carsten Jensen, Sørine Steenholdt and Niviaq Korneliussen consciously write about their own people in Greenland within an anticolonial sensibility, and have overturned a tradition of self-exoticization by older writers in their country who focused on the natural world. Nikolaj was about to embark on field research and visit the new publishing house Milik in Nuuk.

Molly Slavin (Emory) examined the concept of crime in relation to the ongoing legacies of postcolonialism in the contemporary era, particularly in the context of migrants and refugees. Using Mohsin Hamid's new novel *Exit West* (2017), she discussed how the text portrays a lightly fictionalised world overrun by migrants, and how it reimagines the possibilities of cities as places for everyone in a reversal of colonialism. Molly highlighted how Hamid conveys a Brexit-split London as a Manichean city, recalling Frantz Fanon, divided between providing migrants a refuge and driving them away. Molly argued that Hamid's novel, one of the first to tackle the imperially-derived contemporary refugee crisis, assists in understanding why studying crime in literature is imperative to world literature theory and literary studies in general.

Wu Peizhen (Tsinghua) proposed that the character of Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) suggests a kind of cosmopolitanism that at face value is at odds with the imperial age in which the novel is set. Building on Kwame Anthony Appiah's notion of cosmopolitanism, which highlights an ethical obligation for people to care for strangers, Peizhen argued that Marlow exhibits an affinity for other people through his interest in travelling to Africa and his childhood obsession with maps. Peizhen discussed how Marlow's nascent cosmopolitanism points to Conrad's depiction of European colonisers in Africa in an ironic manner.

In our fourth and final session, papers were themed 'historiographies'. Gerald Barr (Houston) explored the differing philosophies, objectives and narrative structures of historical fiction and history by focusing on Cuban Alejo Carpentier's novel *The Kingdom of This World* (1949). Using Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction as a theoretical base, Gerald outlined how Carpentier adapted mythology to fictionalise an account of the revolution by slaves against French colonists in the territory now known as Haiti at the turn of the nineteenth century. In particular, Gerald compared Carpentier's depiction of the revolutionary slave leader turned king, Henri Christophe, as a tyrannical despot with academic historians' more sympathetic portrayal. Gerald argued that Carpentier utilises myth to create an historical terrain in a way that conventional history cannot, thereby challenging conventional Western narratives.

Moyang Li (Rutgers) previewed her emerging research on how mathematics shapes our perception of the physical world. Moyang defined mathematics as specific fields of scientific inquiry – such as arithmetic, algebra and geometry – which each have their own language and rules. She argued that European colonial powers, and especially Great Britain, used mathematics and science in general to prioritise reason and objectivity, as derived from the European Enlightenment. In turn, these colonial powers exploited the notion of a universal, objective world to justify the colonisation and oppression of peoples around the globe. Mathematics became complicit in the colonial project in areas like control over physical space (maps, diagrams) to trade and commerce (currencies, measurements). Moyang applied her thesis to Amitav Ghosh's debut novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986), suggesting that through his creative (mis)handling of mathematical ideas and practices, Ghosh imagines an alternative mathematics through which the world could be remade, perhaps against the worlding of capitalism.

As colloquium leader, it was a delight to work with and to get to know a group of outstanding and committed scholars who demonstrated not only intellectual curiosity and conviction, but also deep personal engagement with the world at large.

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