



The Institute for World Literature
Summer 2021
Postcolonialism and World Literature Colloquium

Participants: Nadia Butt, Federica Soddu, Cammie Tipton, Yanping Gao, Lina Protopapa, Lara ElMekawi, Pooja Biswas, White Hunter, Xiaoran Hu, Jiyun Kim, Shiyi Zha, Asif Iqbal, Yassin Ait Ali, Xueping Li, Sonakshi Srivastava, Lang Wang, Hoda Elhadary

This year's colloquium had an online format where researchers from around the world had four two-hour sessions. In each session there were four or five communications. Every participant had 15-20 minutes to present a paper that was followed by an intervention of five minutes made by a respondent who suggested some points for discussion and asked a question setting the field for the group's discussion. Each session concluded with the group's open discussion on the presentations, and suggestions for further research venues.

July 2: Colonial/Postcolonial Encounters and Dialogues

In our first session presentations focused on revisiting the traditional archives of colonial and postcolonial knowledge stressing the continued urgency of dismantling an exclusively Eurocentric perception of the world that permeates most of Western literature.

Nadia Butt (University of Giessen, Germany) started our discussions with a presentation titled **“Counter Travelling in Caryl Phillips the European Tribe”** where she addressed the role of counter travelling and postcoloniality in the travelogue-cum-memoir-cum-essays by the black British writer Caryl Phillips raising questions on the reversed ‘gaze’. Butt shed ample light on the cultural and racial challenges that Phillips raises in his narrative as a critical, counter traveller presenting a reversed pattern of travel as he, someone from the former colonies, looks at Europe from his perspective, as opposed to the Western way of representing the ‘West’ and the ‘Rest’. Butt ended her presentation by highlighting how Phillips discovers and chronicles black history as intertwined to white history to present Europe as a heterogeneous rather than a homogeneous construct.

Federica Soddu (Rutgers University) introduced us to Sardinian literature and colonialism in a presentation titled: **“Caribbean Elements in Contemporary Sardinian Literature”** where she discussed the connections between images and discourses contained in the literary works of contemporary Sardinian authors. Soddu's work shed light on the colonial gaze towards Sardinia through representations coming from external observers that have constructed it as a site of primitivism, wilderness and otherness, a far remote land with no culture, outside of history and modernity. The presentation focused epistemic de-linking as evident in the works new generation of Sardinian writers who make the postcolonial trend in representing the island. Also, in contrast to previous narrations coming from within the island, they re-discuss Sardinian identity by underlining its Mediterranean, relational dimension, presenting its history as one of continuous contacts with all the peoples and cultures that have, in turn, crossed or dominated the island.

Cammie Tipton (U of Houston) brought us a fresh and intriguing perspective on postcolonialism focusing on contemporary art and British photography. In her presentation titled: **““Seeing Colonially”: Martin Parr, John Thomson and the Legacy of British Documentary Photography”** where she stressed how the camera was a weapon of Empire drawing attention to the fact that and the technology of photography began at the same

historical moment as Imperialism. In her analysis of John Thomson's work, Tipton postulated that John Thomson -employed by the Royal Geographic Society in 1886 who travelled throughout Asia for ten years collecting thousands of images aided in Britain's ambitions to create headway into mainland China beyond colonial Hong Kong. Then, Tipton argued that Parr reversed the traditional colonial trope of "othering" onto England's own working class, a technique the artist formulated that actively emulates the earliest photographic practices of the mid-nineteenth century. Parr invites to see colonially, a prismatic vision, using a period eye that invokes the birth of photography (c. 1826) and the height of the British empire. According to Tipton, Parr's work constitutes a massive break with traditional documentary, traditionally portrayed the poor and the working poor with empathy, dignity in work and represented in black and white.

Yanping Gao (Monash University) paper on **"When the Chinese meet 'John Chinaman': The Impact of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson's *Letters from John Chinaman in China (1900–1910)*"** examined the reception of Dickinson's work in China as well as in Europe while looking at East/ West cultural debates. Not only this, the presentation shed light on the role of Chinese and editors made use of the ideas in Dickinson's work to promote a Chinese cultural identity. In her presentation, Yanping exposed us to the different reader responses to *Letters from John Chinaman*, by writing under the pseudonym 'John Chinaman', Dickinson not only criticized the Western suppression of the Chinese Boxer Rebellion but also referred to the unequal political and commercial relation between Western countries, the UK in particular, and China. This presentation argued that LFJC was very warmly welcomed among its Chinese readers not only because of its favorable views towards China, but because they assumed that its author was Chinese. By tracing the Chinese reception of Dickinson's LFJC, Yanping also examined how Chinese translator and editors made use of ideas derived or associated with LFJC to promote their own cultural agenda against the advocates of 'wholesale Westernization' during China's "East-West cultural debates" in the 1910s.

July 9: Emergent Voices and Postcolonialism

The second colloquium session focused newly emerging voices in postcolonial studies within the ever-evolving cultures and literatures. Masculinity, femininity, and queerness where some of the perspectives enunciated in this session.

Lina Protopapa (University of Cyprus) presented a paper titled: **"Colonizing the Black Body: White Masculinity, White Femininity, and Blackness as Enhancement in *Get Out*"**. The paper examined Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* (2017) as a cultural phenomenon that offered an incisive critique of 21st-century whiteness. While the film expresses black anxieties about the current state of whiteness, it also draws on a longer history of whiteness as an ideology examining the myth of "Black" male promiscuity and sexual deviance that whites used in order to terrorize Black people and re-instate white supremacy. Coagula, a product of the coalescence of various iterations of whiteness, is designed and implemented by the Armitages. In essence, it is a project of colonization of black bodies by the wealthy white members of the Order that is driven largely by an unaccomplished white masculinity and where white femininity is also invested. Protopapa traced the gendered colonial logic that governs project Coagula and the gender assumptions that drive the members of the Order to establish and implement it, as such Protopapa reflected on the entangled notions of masculinity, femininity, and blackness.

Lara ElMekkawi (U of Waterloo) presented a paper on **"The Eternal Moment in Zeina Hache Beck's Poetry"**. In her analysis, ElMekkawi traced how the collection *There Was and How Much There Was* focuses on women from the poet's own life while also including fictional and historical female figures. Here, the storyteller is special and sentimental bringing classical figures of Arab culture into play with contemporary stories of womanhood and experience. Thus, ElMekkawi stressed on the personal, natural, and cultural elements that transcend the immediate moment, creating an eternal connection between the ancient sea, the Arab starlets of the fifties, and the mothers that continue to raise and teach. Building on that, ElMekkawi buttressed how feminine tropes and the inter- and trans- generational transmission of feminine knowledge and experience "rebuild and reembody a connection that

is disappearing” where gender becomes a powerful means of remembrance in opposition to detachment and forgetting.

Pooja Biswas (U of Sydney) gave a presentation entitled: “**Queering the Postcolonial: Myth-Making as Lesbian Resistance in the Work of Suniti Namjoshi**”. In her presentation, Biswas referred to concepts such as lesbianism, feminism; postcolonialism; queer theory in the works of Suniti Namjoshi who the first major lesbian author is to emerge from India in the twentieth century. Biswas argued that Namjoshi used mythmaking as a lesbian, feminist, and diasporic form of resistance to homophobia, patriarchy, and colonialism. In the presentation, there were several extracts from different works by Namjoshi that reflected a deconstructionist feminist approach in dismantling the binary opposites of self/other, male/female, colonizer/colonized, heterosexual/homosexual, and local/diasporic. As such, Biswas maintained that Namjoshi’s writing interweaves the colonial, diasporic, female, and queer experiences together into a seamless narrative of otherness and speaks truth to power through dry, sardonic, and incisive storytelling that appeals not only to certain categories but also addresses humanity in general.

July 16: Coloniality, Modernity and Postcolonialism

The third session started with a presentation titled: “**Hysteric Subaltern Modernists: James Joyce, Yun Dong-ju and Us**” by Jiyun Kim (Yonsei University). Kim’s focused on the colonial parataxis between Ireland and Korea and her argument was that the writing of the subaltern modernist does not represent a passive imitation of imperial writers, but rather is a proactive struggle to resist the external oppression. Another main point in the presentation was disclosing that these anti-colonial modernists enjoyed hysteric *Autre-jouissance* while desperately looking for their oppressed identity. That is to say, Joyce and Yun’s literary style emerged as their symptoms of colonial hysteria to defy colonial order and restore their authentic self. Ultimately, their hysteria was examined as a vital spirit of Fredric Jameson’s *modernity*. Furthermore, Kim used Lacan’s *Discourse of the hysteric* as the guiding principle in her examination by depicting the structure of the hysteric in Joyce and Yun’s works. Kim concluded by emphasizing that Joyce and Yun’s modernist literary technique is a symptom of colonial hysteria caused by their oppressed status as subordinates; it represents a hysteric resistance against imperialist castration, in an attempt to restore their authentic identity.

Next, Shiyi Zha (Brandeis University) who presented a paper on “**The Hidden Dimension of Space: On Liu Na'ou's City writing**”. In her paper, Zha questioned the exterior and interior relation of space and time in the works of Liu Na’ou hypothesizing that individual subjectivity is something intrinsically intertwined with embodied practices as there exists no solid modality of modern life among metropolitan dwellers. Thus, Zha reads the stage of Liu's fictions as 'space' rather than 'place', relying on as Michel de Certeau’s notion of “*space as a practised place*”. In that sense, ‘space’ is the world where human agency enters in generating meaning. Thus, Zha suggested that Liu retrieves individuality from a chaotic, semi-colonial age where subjective narration is often reduced to nationalist repertoire. Furthermore, the apparatus of modernity in Liu’s fiction was seen as an example of the reflection on the interactive relationship between humans and space and not as a static, passive relation.

The discussion then moved to the third presentation by Asif Iqbal (Michigan State University) as he presented a topic titled: “**The Circulation Versus Genealogy Debate in Bangladeshi Literature**”. Iqbal questioned the possibility of reading Bangladeshi Literature as World Literature thus examining questions such as Anglophone literary culture and circulation and the role of translation and the translators in ‘worlding’ Bangladeshi literature. Iqbal thus interrogated the category “Bangladeshi” literature and its two different strands: a) the Bangladeshi Anglophone and b) the Bengali vernacular. By drawing from the scholarly perspectives offered by world literature scholars Aamir Mufti and Pheng Cheah and by considering the case made by the Bangladeshi Anglophone writers in favor of Bangladeshi literature’s globalization, Iqbal illustrated that a debate exists between circulation and genealogy. Iqbal concluded his presentation with a note that the circulatory advantage of the Bangladeshi Anglophone tradition is at odds with the genealogy of a rich local literary culture that must rely on translation – a skill the Anglophone writers often possess – to be able to circulate as World Literature.

July 23: Postcolonial Imagination

Yassine Ait Ali (Princeton University) presented a paper on “**The Postcolonial Rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe: Reflecting on the Other and the Self***”. Ali’s presentation examined contemporary authors who used the Robinsonade to give more consideration to otherness and selfness. Far from taking the self/other dichotomy between Europeans and non-Europeans for granted, those writers instead go beyond and use the story to pose deeper philosophical questions: what should I do with the Other and his/her difference? who am I vis-à-vis the Other? can we live together with our own dissimilarities? Thus, Ali worked on concepts such as re-reading, re-translating, re-evaluating while introducing us to the French concept of French “**désécriture**”, which he loosely translated into ‘dis-writing’ which pointed the discussion into the differences between terms such as re-writing, counter-writing, and the French “**désécriture**”, and how these concepts lead to epistemic de-linking.

Following that, Xueping Li (Beijing Language and Culture U) presented on the topic of “**Between Reality and Imagination: A Post-colonial Reading of *The Word for World is Forest***”. In her presentation, Li called for the further thinking and practices of the transformation of the colonial politics and culture of violence and domination towards non-violence, non-domination as well as the development of strategies of resistance and rebellion against any forms of colonial domination and exploitation. In her discussion of Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel, Li reflected on the nature of the colonizing system and the destruction it brings to not only the colonized but also to the colonizers themselves drawing attention to Robert C. Young’s *Colonial Desire*. As such, Li not only draws parallels between the colonial practices of the Americans during Vietnam war and their destruction of the land, but also draws on another colonial history of the United States on its own land against the native Indians. Li concludes that Le Guin’s writing, moves between reality and imagination, history, and fiction, past and present, a literary writing of the colonial history, making the literary and political into one project.

As for Sonakshi Srivastava (Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha U), she explored the haunting question of hybridity in a paper titled: “**Postcolonial Mimesis: An Enquiry into the Hybrid Aesthetics in “*English, August*”**”. In her presentation, Srivastava examined the relation between language and identity as reflected in the autobiography *English, August* moving back to early works by Macaulay’s “Minute on Education” with its cultural eugenics which found resonance in the postcolonial psyche creating the ambivalent inferiority/superiority complex that assails August, and results in his alienation from his own lot. August appears to embody what the continuous slay of the ambivalent feelings of superiority and inferiority within him, his continuous desire to be the “Other” instead of embracing his “own” reality precipitated by the absurd combination of his schooling, and an obscure name from Hindu myth which he Anglicizes as August.

Lang Wang (Purdue U) presented her topic “**From Darkness to Light: Early Chinese Feminism, Nationalism and *Jingwei Stone* by Qin Jin**”. In her presentation, Wang examined national feminism in the early 20th century China, a period that is very transitional and critical in Chinese history. As a representative of the development of feminist nationalism in China, Qin Jin’s revolutionary life and works constitute the main focus. Qin’s literary and non-literary production centralize the role of women in the society. In her “A Respectful proposal to the twenty million Chinese women”, Qin touched upon issues such as pragmatic learning and its aim, family education and patriotic education emphasizing the women’s national obligation and national responsibility. In the same proposal, she critiques feudal marriages exposing women’s material reality, and calling for a revolution in marriage. In her literary works, especially *Jingwei Stone*, Qin drew on a three-century long form of literature i.e., *Tanci*, which is a rhymed novel written by women and whose intended audience is women. Qin politicised this folk genre to call for social engagement; trying to communicate subversive content through a traditional genre. The novel’s heroines who carry names that mean “the love of community, waking up China and Strengthening China” as such, the feminist elements in the novel are overtly linked to the national project.

The last paper that concluded the 4 colloquium sessions was by Hoda Elhadary (The British University in Egypt) who presented a paper titled: “**Common Leitmotifs and Genres in Partition Literature**”. The presentation focused on focus on the common leitmotifs and genres in partition literature from both the Indian Subcontinent

and Palestine appreciating the role of literature as a tool of translation that turns the specificity of temporal and spatial experiences into a universal human experience that re-presents knowledge and information on historical events in the form of more 'assimilable' modes of representations in line with Hayden White's view of narrative as a "meta-code". Regarding Elhadary's methodology, she adopted an interdisciplinary approach relying on Edward Said's notion of the 'contrapuntal' to read both the literature and social history of the Subcontinent and Palestine's partition to fill in the gaps of the master narratives. By the end of her presentation, Elhadary formulated her framework through which different partition literatures can be compared highlighting the common leitmotifs of harmony vs. violence, women as victims and as agents in addition to common genres in partition literature such as national allegorical romance, and the national *bildungsroman*. In such a manner, Elhadary's aim of worlding the event of partition through literature was viable.

As a colloquium leader, it was a delight to work with and to get to know a group of outstanding and committed scholars who demonstrated intellectual generosity as well as curiosity. Our colloquium on Postcolonialism and World Literature brought together 17 academics with various perspectives in terms of genres, epochs, and theoretical approaches, as well as methodological approaches to textual study which enriched the critical conversations and emphasized on the mutual attention to the intricate nature of postcolonial studies and their relevance to the field of world literature.

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