

Colloquium Group “Politics, Poetics, and World Literature 1”

IWL 2021

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Our colloquium brings together 18 scholars from 15 institutions and 10 different countries and regions to an engaging discussion focusing on topics ranging from the circulation and translation of world literature to the critiques of technology and democracy. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our colloquium took place on Zoom. Despite the challenges of online conferencing, the colloquium proved to be a successful platform where participants shared their research, raised questions about the methodology of literary research, and attended to the nuance of critical categories. We received diverse proposals and the colloquium was organized into four panels.

Our first panel was on the theme of “circulation and survival: problems for thinking world literature anew”. **García Daimys Ester** from Binghamton University opened our discussion with an insightful and well-organized presentation about her PhD research on “**women of color feminisms, native American & Indigenous studies, and world literature**”. Daimys’ thinking questions the conception of globalization as a universalization of experience which creates conditions of dehumanization. She asks how we can understand “circulation” in terms of particularities’ resistance to universality. She contends that “survival,” rather than “circulation,” can give us insight into a more nuanced universal. Professor **Yasser Khamis Ragab Aman** from Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University and Minia University picked up the theme of circulation from the aspect of translation. His talk “**problems of translating oral Egyptian poetry with reference to selected Mawwāls by Hefny Ahmad**” identifies the phonological, semantic, and syntactic problems that arise from translation practices. He looks at the differences between Eastern and Western, oral and written poetry, and the dialectical specialities of Mawwāl translations. With attention to contextualization and cultural specificities, he argues against Emily Apter’s “untranslatability”, and asserts the necessity of translation as an important endeavour of world literature. **Yayuan Mo** from City University of Hong Kong considers the “circulation” of ancient China’s Mozi’s idea across history. Her “**updated universal love**” argues that contemporary leader Xi Jinping’s political emphasis on “the shared future of mankind” can be traced to Mozi’s classical idea of universal love. With this argument, she thinks about how traditional values can be updated for modern social practices. Last but not least, **Adeola Faleye Adijat** from Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria presented on “**the symbolic representation and interpretation of pet-names concept of Yorùba in Ifá literary corpus**”. Her research mobilizes sociological theory and mythological approach to consider the relationship between pet-names in Ifá corpus and literary symbolism. The paper introduces the various meanings and usages of pet-names in Ifá literature and contributes to the argument that symbolism is a universal literary practice. The panel Q&A discussion was inspired by the presenters’ thinking on the dynamics between cultural particularities and universal human experiences.

The panel of our second session was “rethinking tradition: theorizing with the western canon.” **Juan Gallego Benot** from University of Groningen shared the initial research findings and the tentative thesis of his dissertation on “**the possibility of a reformed rhetoric of early modernity in the English reformed church.**” He uses quali-quantitative methods to study John Donne’s sermons and compares them with canonical Catholic and protestant texts to uncover a reformed “modern” rhetoric. His use of digital humanity tools in his research sparked interest among the group. The thematic concern for the problematic “initiation” of western modernity is also shared by his fellow panelists. **Hongning Wang** from Beijing Normal University looks into the sensual writing in John Donne’s poetry and relates Donne’s erotic and emotive expression with the later baroque style. This observation also inspires, among the panelists, a comparative outlook on the European baroque. Following this, **Hong Liu** from the University of Toronto gave her presentation on “**Richard II’s melancholic eloquence and the Trauerspiel of history**”. She studies Shakespeare’s *Richard II* with reference to renaissance visual culture and the age’s theological-political climate. By way of unpacking Walter Benjamin’s concept of the Trauerspiel, she approaches tragedy as an aesthetic reflection of world history. Focusing on 15–17th century traditions of representing melancholy in art, she also complicates literary epochal distinctions such as that between the renaissance and the baroque. Finally, **Lin Hui** from Beijing Normal University gave a presentation on the “**reception of Sophocles’ *Antigone***”. She traces the interpretation of *Antigone* by important western thinkers such as Hegel, Lacan, Irigaray, and Butler and demonstrates how the play’s central conflict between passion and reason is central to its theoretic appeal.

The third panel focused on “literary modernism and beyond: global discontents and metaphors of technology”. **Debayudh Chatterjee** from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign gave his presentation on “**the gaze of the owl and his shrill hoot: Kaliprasanna Sinha’s *Hootum Pyanchar Naksha* and avant-garde literary modernism**”. His reading of Sinha asks whether the “avant-garde” as a literary category can accommodate the specificities of the Bengali language in the context of colonial Bengal. Attending to socio-cultural factors such as the printing press, the spread of enlightenment ideas, and translation of European languages in Bengal, his paper reveals how Sinha’s avant-gardism uses language to write against imperialism and challenges hegemony. **Hairong Chen**’s “**the potency of objects in *Invisible cities***” takes a new-materialistic approach to Calvino’s modern masterpiece. She focuses on Calvino’s material consciousness in the novel and highlights literary modernism’s entanglement with tangible objectivity. Critiquing objectification in the post-technological world, **Claudia Martori Ribalta** from the University of Barcelona presented “**heteronormative technology: Jeanette Winterson’s outlook for progress in *The Stone Gods* and *Frankisstein***”. Claudia studies themes of genetic control and the modification of bodies in Winterson’s later works and relates them with pressures of social normativism. She also considers the possibility of the reclamation of agency through technology. **Kaitlin Moore** from the University of Wisconsin-Madison led us to look closer at “**our sea of Caesium: particles, power, and sites of possibility in a nuclear pacific**”. Their work uses caesium as an organizing metaphor to address the complexities of radioecologies in the pacific ocean and the nuclear physics’ complicity in radio-active colonialism and slow violence. They also draw our attention to indigenous knowledge as a powerful tool to create reparative futures. **Magdalena Leichter** from the University of Innsbruck gave her paper on “**fighting for a better present/past: interference and alternate history in Annalee Newitz’ *The Future of Another Timeline***”. Especially, Magdalena looks at the

interference of the real and the counterfactual in alternative history writings. Thinking with concepts such as interference and uchronia, her paper outlines the important theoretical approach of her study. The presentations were followed by a panelist Q&A where keywords like “objectivity”, “history”, and “utopia” are revisited.

Our last panel focused on the theme of “political negotiation across genres: race, class, and democracy”. **Jan Jakob Hohenstein** from Binghamton University presented on “**Adalbert Stifter and the voting machine**”. Jan first gives an engaging introduction of Stifter and the intellectual history surrounding the 1848 revolution before giving a reading of the problems of voting (or choosing) in Stifter’s Bildungsroman. **Michael Lörch** from Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz spoke on “**readership and ideology in scholarly journals: the case of the *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik***.” Michael’s dissertation work looks at the often-neglected genre of academic journals. Taking the GDR journal ZAA as an example, he draws attention to how political will influences both the publishing and readership of research. Finally, **Sounak Dutta** from Visva Bharati University presented on “**the dynamics of cultural pluralism in the literary history of the Tebhaga peasants’ movement in Bengal**”. Sounak reviews the urban literary documents on the peasants’ movement and supplement them with non-dominant oral narratives he collects from both urban and rural sources. In this way, his work uses literature as a historical tool and with it challenges any simplifying account of the cultural and political transactions of the Tebhaga movement.

To conclude, I want to express my thanks to the organizers of IWL 2021 and the colloquium participants for trusting me with the organization of the colloquium. It was truly a valuable learning experience for me. All our participants have been so sincere in their sharing and so humble in their attitude, which makes the colloquium a safe space for thinking, critiquing, and mutual learning. Despite the inevitable sense of distance that comes with being divided by computer screens, the sincere effort of every presenter and respondent to engage with others was evident. Even when the tight schedule proved to be too tight, the discussion flowed with rigor and respect. I was especially glad to see that people were able to discover and share new readings, research tools, and even new interests in these conversations. Seeing book titles and links being shared via the chat box was another moment of excitement for me as the colloquium host. For these moments, I once again thank our participants.