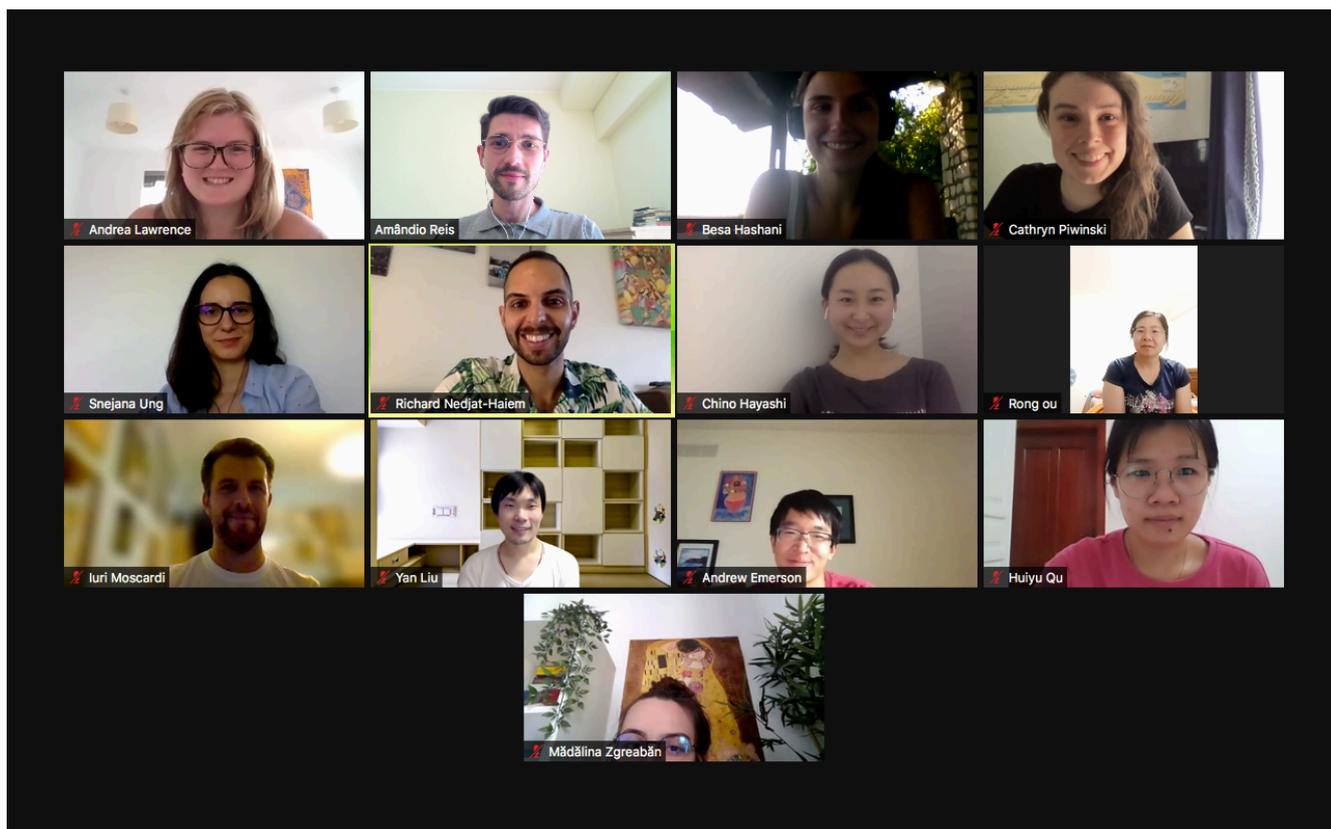


The Institute for World Literature — Harvard U. 2021

Online Session

Production, Circulation & World Literature

Colloquium Report



Amândio Reis
University of Lisbon

The 2021 IWL “Production, Circulation & World Literature” Colloquium gathered a diverse group of thirteen participants from nine countries, including postgraduates, early PhD students, PhD candidates, post-docs, and faculty. Aiming to identify and develop points of contact among the many interests, areas of expertise, and individual approaches to the common themes of production and circulation in world literature, each of our weekly sessions revolved around one wider topic shared by a panel of three or four speakers and their assigned respondents.

After a general introduction and informal exchange between the whole group on the experience of IWL and what it may represent for different areas of study and research, our inaugural session was dedicated to “**Emigration and Transnational Encounters.**” Andrew Emerson (Penn State University) launched this session with “Journey from the West: Views of European Culture in China’s May Fourth Literature”, a presentation in which he considered works by Chinese authors Lu Xun and Shen Congwen, but focused mainly on “Sinking”, by Yu Dafu. Having given a brief introduction to the literary facet of the May Fourth Movement and the paradoxes inherent to its anti-imperialist yet Europhilic attitude, Andrew showed how secondary literature perpetuates the tendency to equate May-Fourth literature with Western aesthetic movements (namely, Romanticism, Realism, or Modernism). To this idea, Andrew opposed Yu Ying-Shih’s notion of “creative synthesis” and the possibility of interpreting these texts as evidence of East-West transculturation. A close reading of the opening and closure of Yu Dafu’s short story highlighted examples of appropriation and divergence from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*. Andrew argued that these passages attest to Yu’s indebtedness to Rousseau’s work, but also to ethical and aesthetic transformations that seem to express a uniquely Chinese experience.

Andrea Joan Lawrence (Monash University & University of Warwick) continued our reflections on transnational encounters with her presentation on “Iberian Studies through the Lens of Combined and Uneven Development.” By privileging distant reading and a materialist perspective, Andrea proposed to reevaluate Iberian Studies as a more appropriate framework for the study of European as well as transatlantic contact zones that tend to be compartmentalized and homogenized in traditional notions of either Hispanic Studies or Lusophone Studies (which, in turn, materialize as Spanish and Portuguese university departments). Drawing from Wallerstein’s modern World-System and from the theory of combined and uneven development, as well as from works on Iberism by Sérgio Campos Matos and Antonio Sáez Delgado, Andrea suggested associating critical tools from the Humanities and Social Sciences as a way to shed new light on the cosmopolitan diversity of Iberianist literature and to free it from hegemonic discourses.

Snejana Ung (West University of Timișoara) concluded our first round of presentations with “Framing the (Non-)Belonging in Post-Yugoslav Migrant Literature.” Snejana started with a historical contextualization and a reflection on “Yugo-nostalgia” as a term that refers both to the longing for an irretrievable past and to a contemporary political instrument, thus conflating different meanings from the emotional as well as the sociopolitical sphere. In her analysis of several works of fiction and nonfiction by post-Yugoslav migrant writers Dubravka Ugrešić and Aleksandar Hemon, Snejana focused on the key metaphors of the “Yugo-nostalgic aid kit” and “concentric homelands.” As her readings revealed profound correlations between literary theme and structure, Snejana guided us through the intricacies of post-Yugoslav routes and temporalities of migration, to conclude that they are better illustrated and understood in the visual form of a literary map. Mapping these various routes shows not only that they are associated with a multitude of characters apart from their narrators and protagonists, but also that they expand our interpretation of the texts into a wider and previously uncharted geographical space.

With the help of respondents Yan Liu, Amândio Reis, and Besa Hashani, as well as other participants, our inaugural session ended with a discussion on the complexities in East-West encounters and routes of influence, the controversial notion of “Iberismo”, and the heterogeneity of post-Yugoslav identities and conditions.

The second session of our colloquium revolved around “**Production, Circulation & Translation.**” It began with Yan Liu’s (UC Santa Barbara) presentation, “When the Cultural Revolution Met the Cultural Cold War: *The New Class* from Yugoslavia to China, 1956-1967.” Yan focused on the appearance of Milovan Đilas’s *The New Class* (1957) — firstly published in the U.S. — in the 1960s and ‘70s project “Grey Paperbacks and Yellow Paperbacks” in China. Considering the three Chinese translations of Đilas’s work, between 1957 and 1963, and the means by which they circulated, Yan summarized the impact of this book at levels of political leadership and common readers. He paid special attention to the critical speculations on whether Chairman Mao had read Đilas’s book. By comparing Đilas’s argument that Communist systems can create “a special stratum of bureaucrats” and Mao’s plea to smash the bureaucratic machine, Yan suggested that the threat of the “new class” described by Đilas may have sparked the Cultural Revolution and the strive for equal political rights.

Besa Hashani (KU Leuven & UC Louvain) followed with “Albanian Literature in English Translation: The Kadare Case.” After a historical and biographical introduction to the life and works of contemporary Albanian writer Ismail Kadare, Besa shared the three main research questions guiding her in this study: Through which channels has Kadare been circulating in English translation? How has his work been framed, categorized and advertised in English translation? Which values have thereby been foregrounded and/or produced? To answer these questions, Besa compiled a data-rich map and chronology of the production and circulation of Ismail Kadare’s literary works in English translation, including publishing houses and imprints, different translators, as well as literary awards and prizes. She also looked into how Genettian notions of paratext and peritext have played an important part in the Anglicization of Kadare. Besa concluded that the English translations of Kadare have not only been subjected to a growing homogenization — from small publishing houses with an ideological mission to major publishers with a wide distribution in the English-speaking world — but also to a process of de-contextualization and re-contextualization intended to promote (and sometimes simplify) the figure of Kadare as a consecrated European and a “universal” author with an anti-totalitarian *posture*.

“‘Oriental Literature’ as ‘World Literature’: A Selection of Oriental Literary Works in the 2nd Edition of *Longman Anthology of World Literature*” was the third and final presentation, given by Qu Huiyu (Tianjin Normal University). Qu began her reflection by posing some fundamental questions about the place assigned in world literature to what we generally recognize as “Oriental literature”, the ways in which Oriental literature integrates the world literary canon, or is excluded from it, and how Oriental works are disseminated and tend to be perceived in the West. Associating these questions with the overarching “problem of literary canon formation” — the subtitle to John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* (1993) — Qu considered the growing visibility of non-Western literatures, at the same time as the concept and the institutions of “world literature” no longer refer only to masterworks by European and North American writers. Focusing on the impact of literary anthologies on the circulation of texts at large and within the educational system, Qu presented the *Longman Anthology* as a special case for its emphasis on modern and contemporary literature and its diversity in the compilation of Oriental canons.

Other participants joined respondents Chino Hayashi, Cathryn Piwinski and Andrew Emerson for a final discussion on the role of translation as a sociopolitical instrument, on the agents and factors (apart from authors and translators, source and target languages) that have an active part in the circulation of texts, and on how (global) “canon selections” and (local) “existing canons” interact in world literature.

The third session of our colloquium brought together presentations dealing with “**Production, Circulation & Literary History**”, including historical accounts of past phenomena but also historically informed views of contemporary trends in the circulation of texts between print and the digital space. Iuri Moscardi (City University New York) presented his research on the imbrication of Reception Theory and Digital Humanities in the form of a hypothesis and a question: “Digital Technologies: A Tool or a New Component for the Production and Circulation of Literature?”. Having as a main case study the projects of “twitterature” — i.e., “the production and circulation of literature in the form of tweets, the very short messages posted by users all around the world on the social network Twitter” — around the works of Italian author Cesare Pavese, Iuri argued that the digital environment is reshaping both the materiality of literature and the traditional roles ascribed to authors and audiences, especially by promoting a more immediate interaction between readers and reading communities.

Mădălina Zgreabă (University of Bucharest) continued the discussion on the metamorphic nature of the literary ecosystem by focusing mainly on the theoretical concepts of entropy, order and disorder. Her presentation — “Dis/Order: Mechanisms of Circulation in Word Literature” — looked back into Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work* in order to explore the appropriation and applicability in aesthetics and art of those three terms derived from physics and employed in information theory. With the examples of Homer and Greek theatre, Virgil, Dante, Mario Vargas Llosa, Haruki Murakami and Jorge Luis Borges, Mădălina discussed disordering and re-ordering as an unceasing process and a framework that uncovers the means through which motifs and themes transition when circulating between different cultures and authors. Finally, looking into Guillaume Apollinaire and Ezra Pound, Mădălina suggested that the theoretical structure of “dis/order” could also reflect the specific drive toward literary innovation that characterizes avant-garde movements, modernism and post-modernism.

Amândio Reis (University of Lisbon) presented his research on “The Modern Short Story: Circulation and Imagination in the Late Nineteenth Century”, in which he focused on the supernatural short fiction of three writers from distinct geo-cultural coordinates in the *Fin de Siècle*: Machado de Assis, Henry James and Guy de Maupassant. After locating the principal means of production and circulation of these authors’ works in the late-19th century boom of the modern short story as a “magazine term”, Amândio centered his analysis on the supernatural trend of the time and its paradoxical association with scientific positivism and a “crisis of reason.” A close analysis of the sub-corpus of supernatural stories written by Machado, James, and Maupassant allowed Amândio to conclude that these authors have tackled the historical dichotomy of reason and superstition mainly through irony and the exploration of different metaliterary textual devices that complicate Todorov’s theory of the ambiguous Fantastic, at the same time as they “re-fictionalize” the short story and turn it into a paradigmatic yet overlooked genre of pre-modernist literature.

To conclude our session, respondents Andrea Joan Lawrence, Qu Huiyu and Mădălina Zgreabăn posed some fundamental questions about the specificities and challenges of literature disseminated in the digital sphere, the links and contrasts between scientific and aesthetic discourses, and the pertinence of “genre” studies in a transatlantic context that emphasizes (enduring) postcolonial politics of circulation.

The 2021 “Production, Circulation & World Literature” colloquium ended with a panel dedicated to “**Subjectivities in/and World Literature.**” Cathryn Piwinski (Rutgers University) started our final session with “A World at the Margins: *Oscar Wao*, its Paratexts, and How We Read World Literature.” After reflecting briefly on the impact of Junot Díaz’s multifaceted public persona on the reception of his works, Cathryn focused on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. By carefully analyzing the book’s packaging and marketing strategies, Cathryn argued that Díaz’s novel may exemplify the type of “World Literature” forged by the Anglophone/American publishing industry — a context within which world literature is “a genre that (perhaps meaningfully at first) foregrounds diversity and difference to ultimately promote a corporatized worldliness that sells books.” However, Cathryn suggested that, through the use of fictional paratext (in the form of footnotes), *Oscar Wao* also responds to the market and even subverts it in hailing and training a “resistant reader.”

The second presentation, entitled “The Dubai Effect: The Transnational Diva, the White Dialect and the Formation of a Gulf Based Pan-Arabism”, was offered by Richard Nedjat-Haiem (UC Santa Barbara). Richard began by discussing Cairo, Beirut and Dubai as historical and present-day shifting centers of Arab culture, with a special emphasis on the relevance of these three geographical, cultural and linguistic locations for contemporary Arab music. He then looked at the White Dialect as a variable *lingua franca* of the Arab world that coexists with different forms of multilingualism which in turn emerge in processes of intrasentential or intersentential code-switching in the lyrics of pop songs. Analyzing the career paths of the Syrian-born singer Assala Nasri and the Yemeni-Emirati singer Balqees Ahmed Fathi (as well as examples provided by other popular stars), Richard reflected on the role that language plays in national subjectivities and transnational communities, as well as on the ways in which the performative art space contributes to the “Dubai Effect” — an intermingling of Arab cultures that promotes variation and diversity instead of assimilation.

Chino Hayashi (Tsuru University) continued our last round of presentations with an exploration of “Comedy and Jewishness in Neil Simon.” To offer substantiated examples of Simon’s comedic style, Chino shared and threw light on selected passages from the plays *Plaza Suite* (1968), *The Odd Couple* (1965) and *Broadway Bound* (1985). Chino’s readings of these texts were mainly centered on the analysis of comedic tropes and structural devices, namely the “snow-ball mechanism” and techniques of repetition and inversion. Articulating these concepts with the French philosopher’s Henri Bergson essay *On Laughter (Le Rire, 1900)*, Chino attempted to break down the characteristics and the effects of Neil Simon’s “anatomy of comedy.”

Rong Ou (Hangzhou Normal University) offered the fourth presentation of this panel and the final presentation of our colloquium with “Virus Poetics and Pandemic Poetry: Rethinking of World Literature in the Time of Pandemic.” As a starting point to her research, Rong drew on articulations and overlaps between Chinese pandemic poetry, pandemic poetry in English, and world literature. In the context of the Coronavirus outbreak in early 2020, Rong presented a vast corpus of poems written by professional and non-professional writers in China, including poets from Wuhan as well as nurses and medical workers, as a “surviving” mechanism. Rong also contemplated the emergence of pandemic poetry in English and multilingual

anthologies (namely, in various Indian languages) published online and in print. She then connected these two poetic expressions of our current health crisis through the concepts of “virus poetics” (coined by Lian Yang) and world literature. Rong suggested that the “virus poetics of pandemic writing” — aided by the online publication and by digital automatic translation of literary works — promotes an effacing of national borders that is somehow akin to the project of world literature.

Other participants joined the respondents Rong Ou, Snejana Ung, Richard Nedjat-Haiem and Iuri Moscardi for the last general discussion of our colloquium, presenting the speakers with questions and comments related to: the editorial and commercial framing of literary works and authors, as well as the specific and/or collaborative intervention of writers and readers in the development of interpretive mechanisms; the maintenance of national identities and local languages in diverse contexts of inter- or trans-culturation, and the problems raised by commonplace notions of cultural amalgamation in the Arab world; the complexities, limitations and uncertainties that gather around such multilayered and polysemic categories as “Jew” and “Jewishness”, pointing to non-homogeneous religious and sociocultural spheres; and the links and (dis)continuities between the specificities of the current Covid-19 pandemic, literary tradition and history, and the future of world literature.

Although we may have posed more questions than provided straightforward answers to many of the subjects discussed during our four meetings, the 2021 “Production, Circulation & World Literature” colloquium was clear in demonstrating, with an abundance of literary examples and critical tools currently available, how “production” and “circulation” are theoretical notions as well as material processes whose meaning and effectiveness depend upon — and must be associated with — a wide variety of historic and contextual factors which cut across different cultural, linguistic and literary worlds. We became more aware that, as one of the driving forces of cosmopolitan literary routes, circulation can be just as heterogeneous as cosmopolitanism itself, not simply illustrating abstract forms of “globality”, but actually fomenting and illuminating — if looked closely — the many *worlds* of world literature. As an example of this richness, our first and final sessions delved into the Iberian-American and the Plural- or Pan-Arabic, but several other worlds were travelled in between, and many more lay in waiting, uncharted or underexplored.