

World Literature and Circulation: Colloquium report.

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There is, I initially thought, a certain tautological quality to the topic addressed by this colloquium, “World Literature and Circulation”. To the extent that world literature can be defined as literature that circulates across borders, the relation between the two categories might be expected to be relatively straightforward. Nonetheless, the focus on circulation as a specific kind of literary movement allowed this group to pursue a wide range of diverse topics, including but certainly not limited to the politics and geography, the ethics and economy, the modernity and pre-modernity, and the languages and writing systems of circulation. The more we zoomed in on circulation as a category of analysis in itself, the more widespread did we find its ramifications, the more varied its forms, the more complex its status as a delimitable aspect of literary history. Indeed, given the extent to which circulation might be said to define world literature, these are variations and complexities that go to the very heart of the field itself. Far from tautologically defining it, our discussions showed that circulation can in fact challenge and transform our understanding of world literature.

Then again, such wide-ranging and thought-provoking discussions would not have been possible with a group less diverse in its academic interests or less engaged in the exchange of ideas than the one with which this colloquium leader was blessed. What the group lacked in size it more than made up for in active participation and variety of scholarly backgrounds. The colloquium meetings were a series of intimate and intense collaborations between eight PhD students, whose topics included Saharan Sufi literature, the North Indian literary market in the 1840’s, the rhythmic intertwining of global tales, satire in 19th century newspapers, the ethics of simultaneous perspectives, the personal essay as political practice, the collapse of the cuneiform world, and the remediation of Samuel Beckett in contemporary Chinese art.

The presentations were divided into three themes, each dealing with a specific kind of literary circulation. The first theme dealt with the circulation of literature across spatial borders – including national, linguistic, and geographical borders. The second theme dealt with the circulation of literature within specific genres and media, focusing on how these can shape the political and ethical practices of literature. The last theme dealt with the circulation of literature across time, and how literary texts were adapted over time to fit changing contexts of reception. As three of the

originally eleven participants were unfortunately prevented from participating, the last of the colloquium meetings was dedicated to an informal group discussion of the various professional challenges faced by early career researchers.

At the first meeting, **July Blalack** presented the work of Ma' al-'Aynayn, a 19th century writer, bibliophile and resistance leader in colonial Western Sahara. Blalack focused on the kinds of address and the forms of encounters that defined the literary circulation in which Ma' al-'Aynayn was engaged. Significantly, this circulation took place outside of urban spaces, and cannot usefully be described in terms of fixed social networks, but must rather be viewed as volatile literary encounters. **Rachel Gould** then analysed the "Oriental tale" as told on the pages of *The Spectator* and consumed in the coffee houses of early modern London. These Oriental tales, argued Gould, register a sensitivity to literary affinities that expand beyond the nation, as local places are suffused with global rhythms, at a point in time when dichotomies between East and West were only beginning to solidify. **Jack Clift** rounded off the session with a presentation on how John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* was translated and circulated in 19th century northern India. Clift highlighted how the circulation of the text cut across literary spheres that would later come to be seen as highly distinct – the Hindi language associated with Hindu culture, and the Urdu language associated with Urdu culture. **Taken together**, the presentations pointed to kinds of circulation that escape expected models of trans-national exchange. All three presentations investigated a historical situation in which divides that would define literary circulation in later periods were only just emerging: situations where national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries certainly existed, but appear less definitive and less fixed than is the case today. The resultant fluidity of literary movement calls for different models to describe circulation, such as the volatile encounters, the global rhythms, and the transcreative brokerage discussed by Blalack, Gould, and Clift respectively.

At the second meeting, **Cristina Núñez Guimerá** introduced us to the history of satirical newspapers in 19th century Europe. Enjoying great popularity and wide distribution, these satirical newspapers, Guimerá argued, negotiated between local and cosmopolitan concerns. On the one hand, the cultural context on which satire relies resulted in significant national differences, on the other hand, the cosmopolitanism of the genre led to widespread international collaboration. **Ellena Savage** addressed the personal essay as political practice, discussing how different forms of essays allowed for different figurations of the political subject. The essay establishes a relation between the individual and society that can be negotiated differently depending on generic expectations, resulting in either the entrenchment or the subversion of the singularity, universality, fragmentation, and uniqueness expected of the liberal individual. **Jenny Lalli** then analysed the 2014 novel of Ali Smith, *How to be Both*, showing how its redoubled structure and metaphors of seeing encourages

a subversive form of empathy. As the reader is provided with multiple and simultaneous perspectives, layered on each other to produce a palimpsestic view of the world, the sense of self is displaced to allow instead for an ethos of relationality. **Taken together**, the three presentations highlighted that the question of genre and media is connected to issues of ethical and political practice. Literary forms can serve both to enable and to constrain various forms of critique – be it satirical criticism, subversive ethics, or the articulation of political individuality. The following discussion focused particularly on the relation between marketability and political critique. What seems today a necessarily conflictual relation, where wide circulation can be purchased only at the expense of radical critique, was perhaps more mutually beneficial in the 19th century, where political invectives virtually guaranteed wide readership.

At the third meeting, **Sophus Helle** discussed the literary figure of Ahiqar, arguing that this character limned the confines of the collapsing cuneiform world in the late 1st millennium BC. The writing system that had for millennia provided the infrastructure of literary circulation in the Ancient Near East was collapsing at that time, creating new dilemmas of cultural and religious belonging, and the figure of Ahiqar was marshalled to reconcile such ambiguities. Finally, the last speaker, **Zhu Wenjun**, provided the group with a striking case study of literary circulation to frame the concluding discussion. She discussed Mou Sen's interactive and multimedia installation *The Great Chain of Being* and its engagement with the works of Samuel Beckett. As a remediation of literature across space and time, the strange world of this installation brought together many of the dimensions discussed throughout the colloquium: the necessity of new models to account for alternative forms of literary circulation, the relation between circulation and political practice, and the significance of the temporal "delay" of circulation.

As a whole, the colloquium provided its participants with a chance to pursue a surprisingly wide range of topics related to circulation. Circulation is a messy topic to deal with – true to its nature, it refuses to stand still, consistently branching off in new directions, throwing up new issues, revealing new complications. Circulation brings together questions of ethics and of genre, questions of modernity and geography, questions of writing systems and religious identity. It was a great pleasure to follow the topic on its many surprising detours in our discussions, and the group made for truly stimulating intellectual company on the way.

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