

# Colloquium Report: Politics, Poetics and World Literature 1

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This year's colloquium "**Politics, poetics and world literature 1**" brought together topics ranging from questions on individuality and community, or geography, to archival works.

The first session focused on "**Cultural constructions of the individual and the community**": the three presentations studied the construction of subjectivity through that of the individual, but also that of the community, while insisting on the importance of language. **Fan Wei's paper "On Lu Xun's *Wild Grass*"** insisted on the portrait of the author and his times, through the vivid use of natural imagery in his poetry. Fan Wei focused on the writer as a fighter, but also as a "wounded soul", while showing that this led him to be highly considered in China, "deified by the nation". The discussion that followed expanded the topic to Lu Xun's novels and how he depicted the writer in his other works. Our second speaker, **Xiaxia Zhang** talked about her PhD research and gave a paper entitled "**Multilingualism in the fiction of Brian Castro**": she argued that Castro's works rely on a linguistic complexity, going beyond boundaries and deterritorializing language at the same time, while challenging the dominance of English language. Xiaxia Zhang insisted on how that transgressive dimension of language

ultimately builds up new subjectivities and communities in diaspora literature and she called this the “*linguascapes*” of the novels. The questions that were then asked enabled to consider the relation between the process of translation and music, and Castro’s views on community. The last presentation entitled “**From the Rejection of Discursive Localisms to the Globalization of a New Epistemological System in South Pacific Literature**” was given by **Laura Singeot** and aimed at showing how bodies of works from Mudrooroo (Australia) and Alan Duff (New Zealand) negotiate representations of Indigeneity. Starting from Edward Said’s *The World, the Text and the Critic* in which he theorizes the cultural movements of filiation and affiliation, this paper questioned the epistemological links those works weave with European constructs of the Indigene, going from the rejection of “epistemological localisms” embodied by the criticism of paternalistic figures and discourses, to an emancipatory “double consciousness” calling for self-definition. The discussion went then back to the use of English to write those novels, echoing some of Xiaxia’s Zhang concerns, as well as to the development of Indigenous literature in Australia and New-Zealand.

The second session’s theme, “**Geographies of writing**”, highlighted the convergence of place and the writing of different subjectivities and communities. In his paper “**Poetics of the Global Village: Transnational Local-Color Literature as a Medium of Globalisation**”, **Hendrik Nolde** studied literature about rural areas, often described as the “losers of globalisation”, showing that in fact those places were entangled with the notion of the global. One of his main points was that culturally informed actions can point to the global and thus this led him to use globalization theory to shed a new light on this literature, using examples ranging from Africa to New England and Maine. Hendrik answered questions about the artistic forms and linguistic styles of those works and was asked whether this literature could also be seen as some kind of resistance to the global. He noted this paradox on which his research relies: somehow village literature is still participating in the discourse of the global. The second presentation of the session was given by **Aida Lago** who presented her paper “**Antigone’s Ruins**”. Aida studied the 1992 film by Straub and Huillet, and the translation of a well-known story from one medium to another. The film’s only setting being Segesta’s theater, in Sicily, led Aida to ponder over the use of ruins as a metaphor, that of the different layers of sediments, echoing the different influences on which this film rests, and the specific emphasis put on the representation of time passing. Aida had the opportunity to develop this question of metaphor in the discussion that followed, as well as that of the palimpsest, linked to the idea of layers that she evoked. **Busra Copuroglu’s paper on “Literary Communities and (Constructed)**

**Libraries: The Circle of East and West and World Literature**” concluded the session. Starting from different definitions of community (such as Nancy’s and Blanchot’s), Busra considered the westernization of Turkish literature and questioned the very possibility of a “library of world literature” since libraries rely on choices that are necessarily subjective. She also showed how the westernization of Turkish literature was in fact much more of a dialogue between Turkish works and Western literature, and how that literary dialogue, as well as the creation of customized personal libraries, ultimately generate what she calls a “textual community”. During the discussion that ensued, Busra detailed the paradox that structured her paper (i.e. the subjective choices on which the libraries are built can lead to the construction of a community) and talked more about the Turkish writers as activists and the attitude of the Turkish government.

The third session (“**Utopia and Dystopia as a reflexion on and of Society**”) aimed at studying criticism as it is usually directed towards society through the use of utopia and dystopia. In her paper entitled “**Animals in Thomas More’s Utopia**”, **Malin Johansson** first retraced how animals were considered at that time from biblical imagery to the humanist debate over hunting. She also demonstrated how their use in literary works referred back to the very definition of humanity, and how the action usually recalls historical events. The discussion then led the group to reflect on the idea of ecology, and of the very visual angle on which those works usually rely. The second presentation, “**Utopian World-Making in Andrew Marvell’s Bermudas (1678)**” by **Bavani Moodley** first considered cartography as the Old and New worlds colluded at that time, and demonstrated that the construction of nationhood was complicated by the proliferation of uninhabited lands. Through the use of utopia, the author gestured towards a better world, criticizing nationhood as it was understood at that time. Bavani showed how national exceptionalism tended to cloud one’s judgment, while on the contrary Marvell’s poems rested on self-reflexive moments and on stretched perspectives. Questions then led Bavani to go back to the frame narrative of the poem, and to consider possible echoes with Cook’s voyages and discovery of new territories, with nearly the same use of expressions and language. Then, **Ali Almajnooni** presented his paper entitled “**A Future Near-at-Hand: The Dystopian Impulse in Mohammed Rabie’s Otared (2014)**” in which he opposed the notions of ideology, associated to a movement of closure, and utopia, as leading to change. The consideration of time is of paramount importance to him as well, since it is not merely to be defined as a succession of events, but rather as an interminable stretch of existence in this novel. In addition, what inscribes *Otared* as a contemporary dystopian novel is the distance it sets

between the “criticized present and the envisioned reality”, as well as its specific use of history and time, since the novel was written in response to the Arab spring. The discussion that followed mostly focused on the paradox the participants saw in the fact that the Arab Spring was mostly associated with the hopes of a nation, but the genre that was used was that of the dystopia, and not utopia as could have easily been imagined at first. **Monica Tomas’s presentation, “‘To Swim in the Polluted Water’: Death, Mutation, and Resistance in Mariana Enriquez’s *Under the Black Water*”**, concluded the session: she explained that the emphasis put on distorted bodies went hand in hand with social inequalities in the city. After mentioning the complexity of the narrative shifting from different points of view, Monica focused on the “dead” river, which does not only symbolize ecological risks, since it is obvious that poverty is also intertwined with the notion of pollution, leading to the animalization of the inhabitants. The questions Monica answered aimed at asking for details concerning the depiction of water and the river as a character on its own, and the differences in social class between the distorted bodies of the inhabitants and the privileged investigator.

During the last session, we discussed **“Cultural Memory: writing about survival and archiving life”**. **Shira Mazuz’s** presentation studied **“The Fictionalized History of *Lincoln in the Bardo*”**. She showed how this unusual experimental novel rested on the trope of ghost stories while using a documentary bricolage. The main element of this bricolage is the assembly of excerpts of historical documents and testimonies, which puts the stress on the construction of subjectivity thanks to the proliferation of different points of view. Shira ended by mentioning that this also implied the blurring of the frontier between reality and fantasy, insisting in fact on the liminal mental state of a person dealing with denial and grief after losing a child. Then, the discussion focused on the other ghost figures, and the use of this unusual trope, but also on the notion of bricolage, as well as that of the visual aspect of the novel and the opposition between the writer’s and the editor’s work. The second paper, **“Importance and Problems of Writing Real-Life Catastrophes in Literature”**, was presented by **Shoko Iwasa**. Shoko first focused on the collusion of such catastrophes and the treatment of parental figures in Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, between the death of the father and the necessary figure of the mother. Thus world catastrophes as well as individual ones coalesce in the novel, and this seems to be a pre-requisite to write about real life catastrophe. The points evoked in the discussion ranged from the explanation of the fact that the mothers were not named in the book, as opposed to the individualization of male-figures, to the question of translation. Then **Sarah Corrigan’s** paper **“Burning Poetry, Hacking Crosses: Unmaking to Survive in**

**Shalamov's Gulag World**" showed how the gulag problematizes the space of misery: there, books of poetry were burned not to get discovered by guardians. As a consequence, Sarah demonstrated how destruction and survival were related in that space, while resting on what she calls the "terror of transformation" of human life in the gulag. The questions raised issues concerning the opposition between destruction-creation and absence-presence, while referring to the impossibility to write about disaster according to Blanchot. As a consequence, Sarah insisted on the fact that such poetry is not only a literature of survival, but is also about the survival of literature. Finally, **Julia Creet** talked about her ongoing research in a paper about "**The Genealogical Sublime**". That concept of "genealogical sublime" derives from the ideas that literature can be used to understand social phenomena and that history and literature work hand in hand. Julia drew on the "Encyclopedia of the Dead" to introduce the notion of archival "hypermnesia", which rests on a paradox: the wish of recording everything is opposed here to the impossibility for human beings to know too much. One of Julia's last points was about the need for technology to create and make accessible such extended databases, relying on "mathematical sublime" and numbers that go beyond what we can imagine. The final conundrum is that, going against the very aim of archival work, we become less and less significant in the database, lost amongst too many other records. Julia then answered questions about Artificial Intelligence, and the social media and networks as new archives, wondering whether they are diminishing the value of the lives they expose.

I would like to finish that report on a personal note and to repeat my thanks to the IWL committee for trusting me with the organisation of this colloquium, and to all the participants, for the quality of their presentations which all led to challenging discussions, sometimes tinged with a slight feeling of frustration because of the tight schedule we had to respect. The exchanges were all very fruitful and I think the success of such a colloquium rests on the fact that all the participants took part in the discussion, not only the respondents that had been appointed to the presentations. I hope that they all feel the same way as I do: the remarks and comments were all benevolent, and the participants shone by their passion and enthusiasm during those sessions. Thank you all again for making my first mediator/group leader experience such a good memory.

