

World Literature and Translation: Affinity Group Report IWL, Lisbon, 2015



The experience of the Affinity Group was found precious by our group not only because of the opportunity it offered to share the participants' work – which was exciting in itself – but also because of the chance it gave us to be exposed to first-hand knowledge of diverse cultures, literary traditions, aesthetic forms and sensibilities.

The Affinity Group on World Literature and Translation gathered 18 young scholars from 12 countries, with the aim of discussing translation, especially in its relation to World Literature. The participants' fields of specialization were very diverse, which led to the attempt to group the presentations according to some principles of homogeneity. Translation was tackled from the point of view of an exploration of particular translating issues, among which were its dealing with vernaculars and its relying on very different theories/poetics of translation. Moreover, translation was considered in relation to the cultural constructions it subsumes and engenders, among which are constructions of race, gender, but also postcolonial and national constructions. Finally, translation was analyzed within the dynamics of national and world circulation.

Some of the participants came from a background of purely translation studies, but were eager to start reasoning about how their knowledge would interact with the field of World Literature, which they were discovering. So, a first meeting was dedicated to the presentation of papers addressing questions in translation.

Melanie Brkich (U of Houston, US) presented her attempt to

produce a first translation into English of Raymond Queneau's *Bucoliques*, highlighting the difficulty she was meeting in keeping the tone of the poems, especially *vis a vis* the ambiguity the French semantics allows for. **Rebecca Hagen** (Heidelberg U, Germany) turned to the domain of re-translations, comparing four recent retranslations into German of Shakespeare's sonnets, and considering the motivations (and results) of this classics revival in translation in Germany. **Liying Hao** (Hebei U of Science and Tech, China) compared four English translations of the famous poem by 11th century Chinese poet Li Qingzhao, applying to her analysis a theory of translation that is dominant in Chinese poetry translations, Xu Jiezhong's *Three Beauties Principle*. She also gave us a sense of the highly crafted and strict structure of the classical Chinese form of the *ci-poem*, and let us hear its recitation in Chinese in order to give us an immediate sense of its sound quality.

When the group moved to cultural constructions of translations, we heard **Susanne Klinger** (Inonu U, Malatya, Turkey) tell us of how the choice of the medium in which the translation is conveyed may affect its reception. Susanne described how the function of the narrator's voice changes dramatically in the audio translation of Chinua Achebe's *Things fall Apart* into German, performed by a famous German actor, especially because in Achebe's novel of conflict the reader's projection plays a crucial role. **Jonathan Fleck** (U of Texas, US) showed us how philosophies of translation intersect with discourses of race in Antonio Risério's Brazilian Portuguese translations of Yoruban poetry, which falsely try to project the ideology of racial democracy. **Idun Heir Senstad** (Oslo and Akershus U College, Norway) demonstrated how in the case of the numerous recent translations of Cuban novels into Norwegian, the translating (domesticating) strategies, mediating agents, and paratexts effected a fortunate circulation. **Mariana Saul** (U of Kent, UK), in her turn, illustrated the dynamics of successful cultural importation, showcasing the design and editing by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares of the *El Séptimo Círculo*, a popular series of translations of mainly British and American crime fiction into Spanish. The same kind of approach led **Esmail Haddadian-Moghaddam** (KU Leuven, Belgium) to conclude that in the case of the translation into Persian of Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho, the relation between the author and his "authorized" translator proved a pivotal factor in the writer's reception in Iran, because his novels' circulation was affected first by commercial and later by political events.

A further group of presentations focused on constructions of national identity. **Katharina Walter** (U of Innsbruck, Austria) compared two 20th-century German translations of James Joyce's *Ulysses* to show how they convey different renderings of national identities in the novel. **Abu Saleh** (U of Hyderabad, India) compared five translations into English by two English and three Bengali translators and concluded that being the novel richly inscribed with cultural references, the translations necessarily lead a colonial/post-colonial discourse and construct different national identities.

A reflection on the theory of translation was led by **Lan Hao** (Tianjin Normal U, China), who adapted the model of core/periphery to the early modern Chinese embryonic system of World Literature, within which she applied the term "core" to classical Chinese literature, and of "periphery" or "semi-

periphery” to Western literature, which Chinese literature was initially regarding as marginal. In the same way, **Sue Jean Joe** (Dongguk, Seoul, South Korea) tried to apply Stephen Owen’s study of Chinese poetry within World Poetry to her own study of the ethics of translation. **Jing Lei** (Tamkang U, Taipei, Taiwan) introduced a discourse on the metafictional representation of translation by illustrating how Amitav Gosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* stages a relationship between languages and translators, communicability and incommunicability. “Translational fiction,” Jing suggested, can be a suitable instrument for exploring values of translation and negotiations of power.

A focus on the translation of vernacular languages was brought to the group’s attention by **Matthew Nelson** (U of Illinois, US), who told us of the issues posed by contemporary writing in Modern Sanskrit, which interrogates the limits of our conception of the “vernacular.” Matthew argued that in the case of Sanskrit, which can be considered at the same time as dead and not dead, translation is the very notion providing the conceptual horizon within which the literature becomes meaningful.

Jan Steyn (Cornell U, US) started from his own practice of translating Edouard Levé’s French experimental “novel” *Journal* (2004) into English (*Newspaper*, 2015) to consider the global and the contemporary as technical problems facing writers. This led him to extend his reflection to the intersection of translation with World Literature, and to question the limits and possibilities for literary representations of the world in our present, global dimension. Finally, **Ting Huang** (Macau, China) reported her own experience as a translator of Adriana Lisboa’s novel *Azul-Corvo* into Chinese, discussing particular impasses and solutions, and attempting to apply Antoine Berman’s theory of “translating the letter” to her own practice.

The group attended the meetings regularly and participated very actively in the long discussions, which were initiated by the valuable work of six respondents (Katharina Walter, Xenia Buchwald, Susanne Klinger, Jonathan Fleck, Jan Steyn and Matthew Nelson). This led to the idea of further collaborating, possibly in the perspective suggested by the IWL organizers of a workshop proposal at next ACLA or ICLA meetings. Proposals could develop around some of the most stimulating ideas that were generated during our debate, such as that of trying to conceive of translation in the new terms hinted at by Amitav Gosh’s image for the creation of a Bangla word in *The Hungry Tide*. Here, the Bengali Indian writer narrates that the word *Badabon* “joins Arabic to Sanskrit – ‘bada’ to ‘bon,’ or ‘forest’. It is as though the word itself were an island, born of the meeting of two great rivers of language” – a simile the group found fascinating and useful to subvert the traditional concept of translation as substitution with that of juxtaposition.

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