

## IWL 2023 – Harvard University



### **Politics, Poetics and World Literature 4**

**Colloquium Leader: Dr. Davina Höll, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz**

Our colloquium on “Politics, Poetics and World Literature” took place from July 6 until July 24. We meet once a week at Dana Palmer House to present and discuss our current research topics. Our group was highly diverse, with scholars from many countries and various fields of interest, academic backgrounds, and career stages. The multifaceted perspectives from B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. students, as well as Post-Docs and Professors from all across the world, enabled rich and deep conversations within and beyond the classroom. The sessions were structured based on the paper abstracts the participants handed in before the colloquium started. In our four sessions, we dealt with the topics of “Exiles in World Literature” (July 6), “World Literature between ‘East’ and ‘West’” (July 14), “Poetics of World Literature” (July 21), and “World Literature in Times of Crisis” (July 24).

In each session, 3-4 participants presented their papers within 15-20 minutes, followed by a 5-minute statement from the assigned respondent. After all the participants gave their talks, we dived into our group discussions. In our colloquium, we discussed various

research works, ranging from dissertation chapters, paper drafts, and talk manuscripts to general project presentations or interview studies. Also, the colloquium's participants made use of different types of presentations. Some presented fully-fledged talks with PPT slides while others, e.g., shared first thoughts on emerging projects more exploratively. In every session, especially during our group discussions, we focused on finding common grounds of interest and reflecting on and critically discussing the different – thematic, theoretical, or methodological – approaches to World Literature that our respective research represented.

After a brief round of welcome and introduction, in our first session (July 6), we explored the very timely topic of the multifarious experiences of exile represented in World Literature across time and space. Isabelle Loréal (University Paris-Nanterre) looked at travel narratives as forms of exilic writing and Joseph Conrad's contributions to the reinvention of the genre. In her presentation, Isabelle argued that in the imaginary, liminal, off-the-charts space of Conrad's "imaginary geography," the truth of the unfathomable human experience on Earth was to be sought. Subhadip Mukherjee (Chase, University of Kent) explored different spatial politics and power dynamics between refugees, citizens, and governing bodies as well as amongst refugees themselves in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and asked how the narrative engages with the question of agency, which, e.g., philosopher Giorgio Agamben largely disregards in his theorization of the camp. Karítas Pálsdóttir focused on the complex of disorientation, liminality, and grief in the genre of Reentry Literature. In the presentation of her creative writing Ph.D. project, Karítas portrayed the phenomenon of readaptation to one's home country as a universally human experience that has been largely neglected so far, despite researchers suggesting it to be an even more challenging process than going into exile in the first place.

In our second session (July 14), four presentations tackled the intricacies of World Literature between the 'East' and the 'West'. Ray Xinrui Zhou (University of Sydney) discussed how W. Somerset Maugham's representations of China in an era of radical changes at the beginning of the twentieth century were embodied in his multi-genre literary works. From a different perspective, Liang Yuan (Beijing Normal University) asked with the words of Percy Shelley, "How the West Wind Blows Sparks on the East Grass," and introduced the colloquium to the reception of the British author in early twentieth-century China. Focusing on the genre of Sinofuturism, Zichuan Gan (University of Toronto) explored the question of "Chineseness" in Chinese Science Fiction and illustrated the ambiguity that the vague

constructiveness of the concept of “Chineseness” entails. Finally, ZiFan Yang (Stanford University) focused on the rhetorics of negation in Modern East Asian Literature and looked at the modern Asian intellectuals’ – Yi Kwangsu, Natsume Soseki, and Lu Xun precisely – simultaneous suspicion toward both the self and the other, East and West, and their lingering desire for the possibility of “a third way.”

In session three (July 21), our discussions developed around three presentations investigating very different World Literature poetics. Yagmur Orak (University of Bern) presented her interview study about exploring family language policy and child agency in multilingual family spaces, discussing how language ideologies, language policies, and the dynamics of family structures influence the discourse surrounding bilingual parenting. Hana Cooper (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) presented the literary trope of the American *belle juive* (the beautiful Jewess). Hana showed during the tumultuous years of the early 1860s, New England author Nathaniel Hawthorne and the infamous poet Laureate of the Confederacy, Henry Timrod, explored the American incarnation of *la belle juive* and her ambiguous perception that corresponded well with modern anxieties as well as the shifting structures of social circles and gender hierarchy both in Europe and North America. Rufang Tan (Beijing Normal University) concluded the session with an intermedial discussion of how James Joyce integrated the works of Johann Sebastian Bach and Richard Wagner in his *Ulysses* to express his political ideas by establishing the musical poetics of a specific ‘gargantuan double fugue.’

In our final session (July 24), we turned to the challenges of World Literature in times of multiple crises. Martyn Bone (University of Copenhagen) started by addressing the environmental imagination that connects William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*, featuring specific aesthetics of ecological crisis at local and global scales. Serra Hughes (University of Amsterdam) followed with the presentation of her draft for an upcoming conference talk. Serra’s paper focused on the distinct literary trope of novel communication barriers that can be found across a transnational range of science fiction and speculative literature and demonstrated by the example of Kazu Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* how lines of difference limit communication and how the world is constructed based on those limitations. Tianren Luo (Fudan University) turned toward postapocalyptic fiction in a world of destruction. By comparing Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Yuba Isukari’s *Yokohama Station SF*, Tianren argued that the genre of postapocalyptic fiction not only is a means of imagining a new beginning and alternative forms of life but primarily functions as an allegory (in a Jamesonian sense) of contemporary financial capitalism. I concluded our last session by

delving into literary figurations of the microbial realm. At the intersection of medical humanities, environmental humanities, and literary studies, I gave a brief overview of how the microbiome and the human-non-human entanglements the concept entails are featured in World Literature before analyzing Joan Slonczewski's *Brain Plague* as a specific example of microbiomic thinking.

In the last part of our final session, we looked back at the past weeks, addressed open questions, and discussed possibilities of further collaborations. I am thankful and delighted that our colloquium's participants, with their diverse academic and personal backgrounds, came together in a committed and respectful way and fruitfully exchanged their multifaceted perspectives on the poetics and politics of World Literature beyond the boundaries of personal interests and academic hierarchies. I wish all the participants the best in their endeavors and hope we meet again soon.