

## Colloquium 10: World Literature and Circulation

**Colloquium Leader:** Margarita Delcheva

The group included 9 scholars, mostly graduate students, one postdoctoral fellow, and two Lecturers. The participants came from various locations, including the UK, India, Belgium, China, Australia, Brunei, and the US. We had four themed sessions, devoted to different aspects of circulation in World Literature. Each session included three presentations, which were 20 minutes long and were allotted at least 15 minutes for discussion. There was a palpable spirit of camaraderie and curiosity, and a plethora of engaging questions and comments by the group followed each presentation.

During our first session on “Transcultural Circulation,” three presenters challenged preconceptions about the canon of texts that cross cultural boundaries. First, Yassine Ait Ali’s presentation “Négritude, Francophonie, and the Graeco-Romans: Léopold S. Senghor Relocating the Classics to Africa” proposed a new field within classical reception studies, called “Classica Francophonia,” analogous to “Classica Americana.” Using a critical framework inspired by Bakhtin, Kristeva, Barthes, and Bloom, he challenged hierarchies of the Western Canon and advocated for the study of marginalized books by postcolonial authors of North and West Africa and the Caribbean, such as Aimé Césaire and L. S. Senghor, who engaged with the canon to make it their own.

Tang Yilin’s presentation “A Microcosm of Modernism: The Introduction and Continuation of James Joyce in China (1922-1949)-From the Circulation of the First Edition of *Ulysses* in China” explored the Chinese reception of the novel, whose first edition numbered one thousand copies, and its influence on Chinese modern literati like Shen Yanbing, Xu Zhimo,

Zhao Jingshen, and Wu Xinghua. It further investigated how reviews of the text in the 1920s, its translations into Chinese, and Joyce-inspired journals paved the way for cultural exchange and the spread of Modernism.

Thomas Nulley-Valdés presented “Continuing with Casanova: the reception of Casanova’s World literature theory and methodology, its Bourdieusian roots, and its possibilities.” His paper discussed readings and misreadings of Casanova’s theory, with stress on Latin American academics. He challenged accusations against Casanova’s “ethnocentrism” and pointed to her descriptions of a polycentric power dynamic of world literature. He further argued that Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* is best applied when the roots of her theory are located in Bourdieu’s sociology of art, especially the concepts of the literary field, *illusio*, and *habitus*.

During our second session, “Translocality and Circulation,” Colloquium participants brought perspectives on relationships between the local and its global connections by examining modes of circulation. Margarita Delcheva’s presentation “Unofficial Circulation: Notions of The Mail Art Network” discussed theorizations of the concept of “network” in Eastern European mail art and the way networking as an action and performance aided in connecting isolated artists. Some examples of artist theorizations she presented were H.R. Fricker’s 1986 International Mail Art Congress idea, which allowed any gathering of mail artists that year to be called a “Congress,” the 1971 NET proposition by Kozłowski and Kostołowski, which disavowed commercialism and authorship, and Robert Filliou’s 1963 idea of the “Eternal Network,” famous for a radical shift in consciousness, connecting human, animal, and mineral into a unified experience.

Hannah Fox's presentation "Translocality and the Circulation of World Literature" discussed "translocality" as methodology, stressing its aspects of "simultaneity" and "situatedness" and tracing its usage in academic fields like Anthropology and Sociology. She argued that the concept allows for a more grounded view on texts and stresses their materiality. Cautioning against a complete de-territorialization of world literature, she maintained that translocality as method is well combined with B. Venkat Mani's concept of "bibliomigrancy." Thus, it is possible to go beyond old binaries of "center" and "periphery," which oversimplify models of world literary studies. As a textual example, she analyzed Said Khatibi's novel *Sarajevo Firewood*, set between Algiers, Sarajevo and Ljubljana.

Sarah Ghazali's "The University in the Millennial Novel" explored various examples of the sub-genre of "campus novel," itself an amalgamation of other sub-genres, and its merging with the "millennial novel." The novel is timed to the cyclical nature of the academic semester and explores themes of exile and belonging in the setting of the university as a temporary "home." Sarah Ghazali identified "mobility" as a method and pointed to the importance of survival, refuge, and post-university return narratives, sometimes also realized in movies and TV series, such as *The Chair* (2021). She analyzed the roles of classic examples of the genre since the 1970s, as well as twenty-first century texts, such as Julie Schumacher's *Dear Committee Members* and Elif Batuman's *The Idiot*. She further presented a world map of areas where campus novels have been written or studied by scholars.

During our third session, "Knowledge Collections and Circulation," the presenting scholars explored how the circulation of texts pertained to their forms and media and how these aided the formation and nurturing of the cultural, political, and linguistic identity of nations.

Maja Aćimović presented “The importance of research and digitization of medieval library and archival material,” focusing on the effects of digital archive preservation on the permanency, promotion, and access of materials. She stressed that the extended time frame digitalization provides for researchers allows for flexibility and the possibility to revisit their impressions. She offered as examples Serbian manuscripts, held outside the country’s borders in other European libraries, which are not easily accessible to Serbian people. She argued that digital manuscript browsing further offers unique features, such as the use of database metadata, which expands research possibilities for archival documents of cultural heritage. From epistemological to managerial, the spectrum of a librarian’s knowledge required for proper handling of archive digitization proves the necessity of interdisciplinarity in the field.

Akash Kumar’s presentation “Making Modernity Through Dictionaries in Nineteenth Century India” discussed the idea of a transnational public sphere, its disappearance and redefining. He critiqued Westphalian assumptions of public sphere theory, such as the belief that all participants belong to a banded political community. He outlined the three main philological traditions of lexicography in the Indian subcontinent (Sanskrit, Persian, and European) and gave examples of poetry that used word play. He argued for the importance of the monolingual dictionary for the creation of social and political identities. At the same time, he brought up the role of William Jones’ comparative philology and the changes in multilingualism in India.

During our fourth session, titled “Identity, Narrative, and Gender in Circulation,” presenters discussed how novels and films, and their reception interact with and transform the production, performance, and portrayals of identity. With their focus on female and queer experiences, the scholars challenged cultural stereotypes and revealed the complexities often missed by previous critical interpretations.

In her presentation, “A Golden Friendship: The Iterative Exploration of Female Friendship in Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962),” Anna Pane examined the idea of “truth” in female friendship through examples from Lessing and Elena Ferrante. She analyzed correspondence archives between Doris Lessing and Joan Rodker to stress the auto-fictional (*avant la lettre*) nature of the novel. Though this relationship had been previously mapped to the characters Anna Wulf and Saul Green, Anna Pane argued that another friendship in the novel sourced from the same correspondence has remained overlooked—the one between Anna and Molly. She maintained that the complexity of the relationship in the novel is upheld by the various iterations of it: Anna and Molly as mothers, unmarried women, communists, and professionals.

In her paper “Strangeness, Exile, Resistance: Isomorphic Structures of Transgression in Queer and Trans Biofiction” Laura Cernat defined biofiction as a hybrid genre, performing a transformation of historical lives for the purposes of literary fiction. She argued that the genre offers a platform for outsiders’ narratives of border-crossing and suggested that the genre of biofiction offers an isomorphism between exile and queerness. She brought together theories by Boldrini and Heilman, connecting gender, genre, and trans histories. She further gave literary examples of narratives from Paul Russel’s *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*, Colum McCann’s *The Dancer*, and other biofictional works that also engage queerness. Laura Cernat’s paper is a draft of a chapter, prepared for the Routledge Companion of Biofiction.

Rand Khalil discussed representations of Arabic women in narrative in her presentation “Arabic Literature as World Literature: The Case of Jokha Alharthi’s *Celestial Bodies: Sayyidat al-Qamar*.” She pointed to the lack of complexity in the Western reception of the novel and in general Western portrayals of Arab women, who appear almost exclusively veiled, subjugated,

and lacking agency. This is partly illustrated by the disparate cover art for Alharthi's original text and its English translation, which features a fully-veiled figure, and by an uninformed interpretation of the novel by James Wood in *The New Yorker*. Set in Oman, Alharthi's novel follows three generations of characters, especially women, struggling with their marriages and romantic lives. Rand Khalil argued that Alharthi's work is best read as a work of literary fiction, for which it won the 2019 Booker Prize, rather than a single documentary representation of the life of women in Oman.

In her paper, "The Reincarnation of Li Xianglan's Wartime Manchurian Legend in 1950s Hong Kong," Junlin Ma analyzed the identity transformations of a Japanese woman, raised in Manchuria, who achieves fame in 1950s Hong Kong. She argued that Li Xianglan's incarnation relied upon the adaptation and rewriting of her life from the two previous decades, in order to attain commercial and political appeal. Li Xianglan's persona challenged cultural boundaries while also performing the identities of an anti-Japanese spy and unhappy singer in popular films of the time. Junlin Ma also offered, as parallels, the lives of novelist Eileen Chang and magazine editor Chen Dieyi, both of whom greatly contributed the transcultural discourse of postwar Hong Kong and whose stories were intertwined with Li Xianglan's.

We closed the Colloquium with ideas about future ACLA collaborations and panels. Despite the diverse array of topics, we kept returning to more and more connections arising between our papers, and we continued our conversations outside the classroom. We exchanged book and resource recommendations, thankful to have met and broadened our understanding of each other's fields of study.