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Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies: For a Ground-up and Located Approach to World Literature

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'World literature' has been much theorized and re-theorized in recent years as comparative literature for the globalized age. As it moves out of the Euro-American 'core' of earlier comparative literature, it embraces those of us who work on Asian, Middle Eastern and African literatures, spurring us on to participate in this broader conversation and engage more directly and explicitly with the categories and models that underpin world literature.[1] Yet its theoretical approaches based on world-system theory, diffusion and circulation, its geographical meta-categories such as 'world' and 'global', and its linear and teleological historical narratives that inevitably begin with Goethe all seem to imprison non-Western literatures in categories, timelines and explanations that do not fit, rather than genuinely interrogate them.

The problems

Broadly speaking, we see four basic issues with comparative literature in its globalizing guise. The first is the continuous reinscription of the nation and national literature as the building blocks that comparative literature both builds upon and transcends.[2] This of course goes back to the European foundational moment of national *and* comparative literature in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it assumes an identity link between language and nation that is not completely apt even in Europe itself, and which is all the more misleading and mistaken in regions of the world that have remained profoundly multilingual and where the project of a national language remains unfinished, or even impossible. To think of comparative or world literature as international relations is not inappropriate, of course, but to think of it as exclusively so elides and obscures all the other kinds, levels and modes of literary contact both within and outside the nation. (If we shift the lens from nation to language, the identification of language and nation becomes difficult to maintain even within Europe, as the cases of German, French and English all show.)

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[2] See Shu-Mei Shih's point about the need to move away from the national and the linguistic, as they 'are no longer metonymies and mutually determining' (2004, 27).

The second problem is the exclusive focus on empire in West–non-West transactions. Again, this is of course not to deny that empires were hugely important in putting distant areas of the globe in contact with each other under particular and asymmetrical conditions of discursive and real power. But empire as an analytical lens seems to work in comparative literature almost exclusively in terms of centre–periphery relations with very clear vectors of 'diffusion' and 'impact'. Comparisons are pursued only between East and West, and any innovation in the colonized non-West, certainly 'literary modernity', becomes necessarily the product of direct colonial influence. What this focus obstructs are the many other types of traffic and 'lateral' literary contacts that empire facilitated but that do not fit within the centre–periphery model. It also mistakenly reinforces the notion that imperial languages such as English worked as autonomous agents, influencing other languages and literatures around them while remaining utterly uninfluenced themselves.

Third, the single-language, national or quasi-national modern literary histories written under the aegis of nationalist ideologies have partitioned African and Asian Anglo- and Francophone literatures from literatures in local languages, producing mutual blindness and exclusions. For example, modern literary histories in Morocco exclude either French or Arabic and they all exclude Berber/Amazigh; in Ethiopia they only consider Amharic to the exclusion of literatures in the other Ethiopian languages and in English; and in north India they view Hindi, Urdu and English either in isolation or in mutual competition. Everywhere, postcolonial literary theory, the most vocal in theorizing the relationships between Asian and African literatures and the former empire, has focused almost exclusively on writing in English or French and on oppositional literary discourses, thus clearly presenting a highly selective view of Asian and African literatures and often distorting the interpretation of works not directly concerned with reacting against colonialism, or oversimplifying and overgeneral-izing literary experiences in both European and Asian/African languages (for critiques, see Barber 1995, Furniss 1998, Garnier 2012, Raji 2012, etc.). The division between Anglophone and Francophone and Asian/African languages means that we do not yet have good critical accounts of how literature worked in multilingual colonial societies, while strong models of imperial hegemony obscure the other roles that French and English played or the fact that these languages were not uninfluenced by the colonial encounter. This is the problem with over-rigid applications of Bourdieu's notion of subjugation and domination, according to which a language or literature are either dominant or dominated (1991). So even if many of the leading postcolonial theorists have been Indian scholars of English, we lack any holistic and connected account of modern literary production and change in English *and* Indian languages (with the exception, for Bengali and English, of Rosinka Chaudhuri). The few studies of the *actual* circulation of English literature in India (Joshi 2002), of literary translations into and across Indian languages and English, and of English responses to Indian literature (Collins 2011 on Yeats and Tagore) show a very different picture from that of the 'imprint of English' – a mixed landscape of selective and bold appropriations, the persistence and trans-formation of local genres, and metropolitan misunderstandings.

The fourth problem is the current predilection within world literature for universal categories and simple macro-models that aim to cover the whole world like a single map (Orsini 2015). The category 'world' is borrowed unproblematically from the social sciences, its systemic integration warranted by the universalist categories of economic discourse; even 'literature' is predicated upon a putative universal consensus over form and taste that is deeply problematic in that it marginalizes or excludes orature as well as literature that fol-lows other aesthetic canons and systems of meaning (Marzagora 2015). What is the single 'world' in world literature? Is it a product of the imagination, of multinational publisher-speak, of the 'system' of prizes and festivals? Whose tastes do these world prizes and festivals

represent? And how thin and patchy is this world? Paradoxically, the move to broaden comparative literature to include the whole world ends up dismissing nine tenths of its literary output because if a text or a literature does not circulate 'globally' it must be provincial, not good or modern enough, certainly not 'world literature'. But if to simply state, like Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova or the Warwick Research Collective, that world literature is 'one and unequal' (Moretti 2000, Casanova 2004, Warwick Research Collective 2015) reinforces rather than questions the paradigms that make it so, what alternative approaches can work better? How can we study and theorize Anglo- and Francophone literatures and literatures in African and Asian languages *together*, in ways that do not simply reinforce the current privileging of Anglophone and Francophone writing?

The project we are currently running argues that we can arrive at a more 'modest, and honest' (Lewis and Widgren) picture of world literature if we: (1) adopt a multilingual approach to archives, texts and genres, and literary tastes; (2) take a 'ground-up' and located approach that seriously considers local production, circulation and theorizations and seeks to understand how 'multilingual locals' actually work (see also Mallette 2005, Ram 2007, Orsini 2010, Rohatgi 2014); (3) think about wider trajectories of circulation, reception and meaning-making through the concept of 'significant geographies' rather than meta-categories such as global and world; and (4) imagine history/time and space not as linear but as multiple, relational and inevitably fragmentary/discontinuous (Massey 2005).

World literature and multilingualism

The first step is to question the identification of language with (national) territory and the language-script-community that underwrite both comparative literature and national literary histories, including those of the regions we work on (North India, the Maghreb, the Horn of Africa). Instead, we aim to recover and understand the literary practices and dynamics within multilingual regional societies, in the modern and contemporary as well as earlier periods. Multilingual societies and literary cultures, as quickly becomes obvious when you start looking, have been the norm rather than the exception throughout history in most of the world, and single-language national or quasi-national literary histories have been inappropriate and misleading. That more and more scholars are focusing on multilingual 'contact zones' and transregional and transnational networks suggests that we are not alone in this realization (Ram 2007 on Georgian–Russian contact, but also Valdés and Kadir 2004 on Latin America, Mallette 2005 on Sicily, Ricci 2011 on Southeast Asia). This body of scholarship that explores literary interactions, acculturations and transculturations also usefully directs our attention beyond the usual trajectories of East–West encounter (see also Hofmeyr 2007 for South Africa and the Indian Ocean). Thornber's monograph on the East Asian 'literary contact nebula' offers an invaluable guide, with its focus on readerly, writerly and textual contacts between China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan and Manchuria before and during the Japanese Empire (2009).

In her earlier work on early modern north India (2012), Francesca Orsini developed an approach that included: (1) sensitivity to linguistic registers and 'traces' of other languages within texts; (2) a focus on space as analytical category to look for the 'multiplicity of stories' (Massey 2005); (3) and attention to performance dimensions and the oral reach of texts to be able to think beyond the apparently insurmountable barriers of literacy and script (Orsini and Schofield 2015). Sara Marzagora has argued for the need to map out 'a system of connections' in African literary studies beyond/away from the usual Africa–West relations and 'between different African layers, and between intra-African and extra-African literary networks'. At the same, she also argues that 'there is a right of disconnection to be affirmed: the right for disconnected literary traditions to exist without critics considering them backward and calling for their prompt integration into the planetary literary system' (2015: 49). She continues:

> Cross-influences, exchanges, movements coexist with disjunctures, discontinuities, non-communication. So conceived, the cultural space is always plural and relational or, in the words of geographer Doreen Massey, a 'sphere of coexisting heterogeneity' [Massey 2005, 9] where multiple and sometimes contradictory cartographies exist alongside each other, being shaped and reshaped by literary actors. (Marzagora 2015: 50)

In similar fashion, Karima Laachir has theorized 'reading together' or comparatively reading the works of Arabophone and Francophone Moroccan authors. As she puts it: 'This approach moves away from the common reading of postcolonial Moroccan novels in French either as "alienated" from the national culture and hence excluded from the Moroccan literary canon or as "transnational" and "cosmopolitan", which not only disconnect them from their vernacular context, but also from the novels written in Arabic' (2015: 11). In this way, '"reading together" overcomes the limitations of hegemonic regional literary systems such as Arabic or Francophone, which are both exclusive and do not pay attention to the particularities of local contexts, particularly those with a complex and rich multilingual history and quotidian life like the Maghrib and Morocco' (ibid.) In her approach, 'reading together' highlights the interwoven aesthetics and politics of Moroccan postcolonial novels in Arabic and French expression, and 'how they have been in dialogue with each other, not only in responding to the same social and political contexts but also in terms of their intertwined aesthetic influences', since both Arabophone and Francophone writers have been familiar with French and Arabic traditions. As a result, instead of looking only for Arabic genealogies for Arabophone authors and works and French genealogies for Francophone ones, 'reading together' recognizes the Moroccan novel's strong links with its pre-modern Arabic traditions, its indebtedness to European, Mashriqi, and African literatures' (ibid.).

Located approaches

In contrast with the only apparently neutral aerial views of the world literary map, our current project thinks of world literature, or rather of views of world literature, as always necessarily located, either geographically, historically or in terms of particular genre or intellectual debates and philosophical positions. As we asked at a recent collaborative workshop[3]: What worlds do Asian and African writers simultaneously *inhabit* and *create*? Far from being a given, 'world' is always a view from somewhere, and it is important that we acknowledge this positionality. While 'world-system' macro-models assume a universally shared set of literary values and tastes (Casanova), we intend to show through 'located discussions' with local scholars, writers and students in situ in Morocco, Ethiopia and India, that location significantly impacts the production of theory and critical discourse. As Sebastian Conrad has pointed out in *What is Global History?*, it is telling to see who has a stake in global/world literature – typically scholarship located in former empires – and who does not. As Marzagora puts it, we should acknowledge the 'right to disengage'.

Multilingual locals

If what is absent from aerial/global views of world literature is the 'local' (Orsini 2015) and what is absent from single-language accounts are integrated/connected accounts of the life and dynamics of literature in multilingual societies, our project works with the category of 'multilingual locals' and uses space as an analytical category to direct our

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³ "The Locations of (World) Literatures: Perspectives from Africa and South Asia", organized by Francesca Orsini and Laetizia Zecchini, École Normale Supérieure, Paris, 20–21 June 2017.

attention towards how exactly multilingualism works and how it has changed over time in the societies and literary cultures that we study. North India, the Maghreb and the Horn of Africa all had older histories of multilingualism (Persian, Sanskrit and Hindavi in India; Arabic, Spanish, Judeo-Moroccan and the different forms of Berber in Morocco; Amharic, Oromo, Tigrinya as well as Geez and Arabic in the Horn of Africa) and of transregional networks, which were partly erased in subsequent ethnocentric literary histories. Each region underwent different experiences of colonization or semi-colonization and evolved somewhat different patterns of print culture and modern education, with new attendant language diglossias, but saw the development of similar discourses of national tradition and literary modernization. In all three areas orature remained as significant as written literature, and in each case different genres, at times local ones, seem to have to be more significant and valued than the heroine of world-literary diffusionist approaches, the novel. But rather than assuming multilingualism as a unifying and entropic factor, we are interested in exploring the fractures between languages and speakers and the asymmetries of access to texts and traditions. We are aware that 'organic multilingualism' inhabits hierarchical structures and practices, that it gets challenged, yet usually does not quite disappear, under the attack of exclusivist language ideologies that 'other' certain languages and tastes. In situations of ethnic conflict, multilingualism needs to be actively fostered as a bridge between communities (De Silva 2016).

Significant geographies

Finally, if for the reasons outlined above we are suspicious of the use of meta-categories such as 'global' or 'world', we prefer to think through the concept of 'significant geographies'. By 'significant geographies' we mean the wider conceptual, imaginative and real geographies that texts, authors and language communities inhabit, produce and reach out to. In any society and literary culture these will be plural, along axes of education and class, socio-textual community, religious and cultural affiliation, and so on. Some geographies are shared (though accented and re-accented), and some are specific to a group or a tradition. In multilingual contexts, this plurality gets multiplied and further complicated because of the multiple conceptual vocabularies/languages and knowledge and literary traditions.

The advantage of thinking of significant geographies over 'world', we contend, is that it makes us consider local and distant geographies – whether imaginative or real, networks or horizons – and their interrelationship in ways that: (1) *foreground the literary* in its various definitions; (2) make us think about *actual trajectories and specific uses of spatial concepts/images*, and so geographies that are *significant* rather than generic meta-categories such as 'world', 'global'; (3) highlight multiplicity, openness and disjuncture, and discourage easy technologies of recognition and complacent distant gazes. We move away from universalist models where space and the world are givens to models in which geographies are produced and made sense of by linguistic agents: 'world' becomes *one* among *locally* produced concepts. If world literature 'is not an object, it's a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method', then statements like 'the literature around us is now unmistakably a planetary system' (Moretti 2000: 54) do not help. Rather, we need a spatial thinking that does justice to the complexity of the task. For instance, while the Christian highland regions of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, where literary culture revolved around the religious language of Geez (closely related to Amharic and Tigrinya), were closely connected to the 'Christian Orient' that included Egypt, Georgia, Armenia, Levantine Arab countries and Greece, the predominantly Muslim lowland regions stretching to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean had Arabic as the language of learning and felt part of the wider Arabic world. Significant geographies is thus a useful concept to explore to what extent the geographical imagination in multilingual locals overlaps or diverges along lines

of language and genre; and how colonialism and de-colonization engendered new significant geographies both in the metropoles and the colonies (Leask 1991, Deboie 2003, Brantlinger 2009, Boddi 2012, Kilito 2013).

Conclusion

While deterministic models have attempted to bring the multifaceted characteristics of world literature down to a single linear history, our approach follows Massey's conception of space in highlighting its open-endedness, unpredictability and 'multiplicity of stories and relationships' (Massey). So we ask, how did modern writers in north India, Morocco and Ethiopia appropriate and transculturate older literary models/genres as well as those from other literatures? What are the dynamics of these multilingual locals – do people read and write in more than one language, or read and write in one but also participate in others? Do they keep literary tastes in the different languages separate or do they mix them? Is access more through oral media or through technologies of writing? Should we think in terms of readerly, writerly and textual contacts (Thornber) or of fragmented multilingual locals, where recognition is more at the level of author's names than of actual access to their works? How do these actors imagine the 'world' and their belonging to it? What have local debates on world literature been like, what have they privileged and selected, and why? What have modern language-literary formations marginalized? Has any of this multilingual literary production achieved international ('global') recognition, and if so how? In recent decades, postcolonial studies, with their Anglocentric and Francocentric focus on networks of diasporic writers and international markets, have reinforced newly fractured multilingual locals in Morocco and India. French in Morocco and English in India are only *one* of the languages in which literary production takes place, yet languages other than English and French have received much less scholarly attention. This scholarly asymmetry has resulted in deep gaps in our knowledge of the literatures of the Horn of Africa, where literary production is mostly in indigenous languages. How, our project asks, can we study and theorize Anglo- and Francophone literatures and literatures in African and Asian languages *together* in ways that do not simply reinforce the current privileging of Anglophone and Francophone writing (Laachir)?

Finally, Damrosch (2006) has already drawn attention to the fact that world literature cannot be a homogeneous canon or idea but is invariably inflected by its location. The belief that theory is not geographically neutral but also has a located origin and life (Srivastava and Bhattacharya 2010, Aboul-Ela 2011) underlies our project's comparative approach and our planned discussions in Morocco, Ethiopia and India about what world literature means from these located perspectives. Our focus on the positionality of literary actors, which varies within the same literary space, depending on class, gender, religion or other details of individual biography, complements our emphasis on individual agency in the creation of significant geographies.

Our project then proposes a South–South comparison that is about 'relation' (Shih) and patterns rather than direct contact or connections. Though we are finding contacts, particularly through Leftist networks in the period of decolonization, we do not want to highlight only them as 'world literature'. Rather, we propose that the *texture* of world literature emerges from the layering of these different stories, relationships and dynamics, some of them local and some following more distant loops and trajectories. More often than not, textual and writerly contacts seem the result of accident than of systemic convergence (as with Rabindranath Tagore and W. B. Yeats), and become emblematic only in retrospect. Comparison is functional to our aim of proposing a located approach to world literature that *complements* the current approach based on global circulation (Damrosch) and *replaces* the simplistic and misleading grand narratives of European centres and Asian and African peripheries (Casanova, Moretti 2006). Against a historical understanding that posits 'world

regions' as superseded by a 'world-system' with Europe at its imperial centre (Moretti 2006), a located and multilingual approach shows that the imperial centre–colonial (or quasi-colonial) periphery axis was only one among the vectors of circulation, that European literature was also co-constituted through this axis rather than being a prior formation, and that language, or rather multilingualism, may indeed be a better starting point than the nation for comparative literature.

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