

**New Keywords for World Literature**  
SOAS/QMUL, 11-12 March 2021  
Abstracts for Day 1

**The relational modality of the “vernacular”**

*Stefan Helgesson (Stockholm University)*

As one emergent keyword in world literature studies, the “vernacular” remains surprisingly unspecified and under-theorised. It is frequently gestured towards as a locus of authenticity or, alternatively, dismissed as an outdated and demeaning term – but there is, as yet, little consensus on what it actually might mean. After first highlighting some historical aspects of the term, this paper will argue that in order to gain traction in contemporary literary studies, it needs to be rethought by way of current theorisations of monolingualism, language boundaries and multimodality (see work by Naoki Sakai, Yasemin Yildiz, David Gramling, Till Dembeck, Julia Tidigs and Markus Huss). Seen from that perspective, in turn, the concept of the vernacular allows us to discern a relational modality within literary practice that these other language theories tend to miss. This modality involves multiple interfaces, including those between orality and print, between class-based or ethnically defined speech communities, and between different literary fields.

**The Silk Roads of World Literature: Blue and White**

*Wen-Chin Ouyang (SOAS, University of London)*

How do we bring Arabic and Chinese together into comparative literature that need not rely on direct influence or turn to parallel studies but still privilege intercultural dialogue? The literary world is saturated with traces of cultural encounter, including bodies of knowledge, such as Orientalism, objects, such as silk, velvet and porcelain, and food and drink, such as bread and tea, whose itineraries of travel around the globe resonate with the Silk Road. The Silk Road haunts many literary works inhabited by people, things, ideas, ideologies and even entire cultural institutions that have come from far and wide to partake in the construction of their textual world. The famous and pervasive blue and white, always attributed to the Ming Dynasty, is both multilingual and multicultural. Its development, very similar to the world literature classic, *The Thousand and One Nights*, has depended on global circulation and intercultural collaboration. More importantly, it participates in circulating literary works and cultural institutions around the world (e.g., tea, tea ceremony, teahouse culture; coffee, coffee ritual, and coffeeshouse culture; and even interior design). Following in the footsteps of blue and white I interrogates our conception(s) of language and literary circulation in order to go beyond the current paradigm(s) of comparative literature and world literature. I look specifically at two ‘entangled’ roles of blue and white: one as an object that acquires additional meanings and symbolic capitals as it travels around the world; and as a vehicle that transports poetry and story along, let us say, the Silk Roads, bringing literary traditions from different parts of the world into conversation and innovation.

**World literature from the ground up**

*Francesca Orsini (SOAS, University of London)*

Our MULO SIGE (Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies) project has aimed to rethink world literature “from the ground up”. We have been consciously anti-systemic and have not aimed for either completeness or closure. Rather, our attempt has been to open up new ways,

viewpoints (no bird's eye view here), archives, and methods of “doing world literature” so that world literature really is a “modest and honest” (Wigen) attempt to figure out “literature in the world” (S. Shankar) rather than work like an exclusive club. In the process, several keywords have become important to us. **Location**, as a starting point, a node, a route, a memory: a located approach is the starting point of an exploration, a node in multiple overlapping circuits and trajectories (Massey), and the site of encounters; a way of looking at, and being in, the world that may be far-reaching but is always partial and limited. Our **multilingual** approach has first of all been an attempt to “put the languages back together” in contexts where literary languages have been considered separately from each other (Fusaha and Darja Arabic, French, and Amazigh in Morocco; Hindi, Urdu, English and the *bolis* in North India), or where a strong national language ideology has denied space and recognition to other languages and literary traditions (as in Ethiopia). This has involved thinking of **embodiment** and of the tension between language ideologies and **literary tastes** and practices. But as we have also moved to consider **orature** as part of world literature, it has become amply clear how songs, stories and other verbal art forms in other languages are “**present absences**” in the literary life of a city like London (Multilingual London Festival, Nov 2020). Global English is not only “born translated” (Walkowitz), it is also crisscrossed by other *literary* idioms. Finally, we have explored the links between political orientation and affiliation and **literary visibility** (or **invisibilisation**), the enabling and curatorial **literary activism** of magazine editors (and now bloggers like Ann Morgan!), and the crucial role of **intermediate translations** in the circulation of world literature.

### Literary Historiography and the Problem of the Universal in World Literature

*Debjani Ganguly (University of Virginia)*

Who and what the *world* is to which world literature refers and is constituted by, is a question that ramifies in our field. One can scarcely miss the disjunction between recent influential theories of world literature that perpetuate a universalist narrative of European expansion and diffusion (Casanova, Moretti) and the diversity of global comparatist work that illuminates myriad cartographies of literary world-making across various scales and linguistic zones, and within temporal frames irreducible to European literary history or the capitalist world-system. What constitutes the ground of universalism for literary historians today? My paper argues that historians in the twenty-first century are primed to explore genealogies of world literary formations that not only pre-date the rise of Europe, but are also critically co-extensive with it *and* demonstrably foundational to the very conception of the modern idea of world literature. Our contemporary conjuncture is epistemologically different from the historicism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that valorized second-order observation to resolve the problem of perspectivism. This involved leaving the past behind us, of affirming that the ground of knowledge was also the ground of a fundamental rupture with past life forms. The present was a narrow temporal strip, but one open to an infinite future. The topology of literary history today is marked by the disappearance of this epistemological ground. The *now* of our knowledge worlds is crowded by simultaneous *past*s that are not only not dead, but that vigorously question the narrow cultural horizon of the present. The reanimation of world literature by its philological antecedents from both western and non-western cultures, registers these shifts in the epistemological ground of literary history. Drawing on insights from my two-volume project, *The Cambridge History of World Literature*, I suggest that the task for a contemporary historian of world literature is one of braiding centuries-long histories of global literary exchange and their traces in the contemporary, with a conceptual universalism, theoretical multivalence, and methodological

pluralism in order to generate a sense of coevalness among diverse literary cultures as they inhabit our present.

### **Beyond Circulation**

*Galin Tibanov*

*(Queen Mary University of London)*

In this paper, I seek to reflect on some of the central concepts that inform the current Anglo-Saxon discourse of world literature; I am particularly interested in revealing the implications they hold for how we think and write the history/histories of world literature. "Circulation", to give but one example, is one such concept that seems to me to be in need of reconsideration. Circulation is, of course, a concept helpful and problematic in equal measure. It has widened immensely the geography of world literature and has sharpened our sense of what happens to literary works as they cross the historically mobile borders of different cultural and literary zones (zonality is, as I will try to argue, the specific mode of existence of world literature, both before and during globalisation). But deploying the concept of circulation comes with an opportunity cost: like most viable concepts, it conceals while it reveals. What it conceals is the fact that world literature is not just a complex assemblage of ready artefacts that circulate around the globe. It is above all a process that has temporal depth to it. Our current notion of world literature, certainly in the Anglo-Saxon mainstream, emphasises and studies predominantly the circulation of these ready artefacts; in fact, what circulates, along with these artefacts, are powerful discursive energies, verbal masses at different stages of formation, debris of older and now reconstituted genres, building blocks for poetic and linguistic conventions yet to take shape.

### **World literary *practice*: some preliminary thoughts (Working title)**

*Shital Pravinchandra*

*(Queen Mary University of London)*

This paper starts from the premise that there is a major distinction to be made between world literary *practice* and world literature scholarship, between the way that readers encounter world literature and the way in which current scholarship defines what counts as world literature. My focus will be on the former, that is, on the anthologies, magazines and citations through which readers are presented with works of world literature. Building on the work of Francesca Orsini and the MULO SIGE network on the magazine and on my own work on the under-theorised role of the short story in world literature, I will discuss the practices of curation that distinguish world literature anthologies from literary magazines, and consider the importance, or lack thereof, of making readers aware of the cultural context in which a work is produced. (Recall here Damrosch's contention that 'Works of world literature are best read with an awareness of the work's original cultural context, but they typically wear this context rather lightly.')

Finally, I will discuss some specific examples of literary citation (of authors citing other authors in their works) in order to probe the at times confounding world literary juxtapositions that result from this order of curation.