

WRITING THE COSMOPOLITAN IMAGINATION: GENRE TRANSACTIONS IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

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Abstracts

“Every woman in London seemed to have some secret service activity on hand”:

Secrecy in Nancy Mitford’s Spy Novel *Pigeon Pie*

Aileen Behrendt (Potsdam)

In 1931, Greta Garbo starred in George Fitzmaurice’s *Mata Hari*, a film based on the life of the famous dancer and courtesan, who was executed for espionage during the First World War. With the beginning of the Second World War public interest in the figure of the spy grew further – a phenomenon which Nancy Mitford mocks in her espionage novel *Pigeon Pie*. After all, how interesting can it be when “Every woman in London seemed to have some secret service activity on hand”¹?

Traditionally, by gaining intelligence, the figure of the spy sets out to protect the nation and by extension a national identity that seems threatened. In *Pigeon Pie*, this threat is palpable with the outbreak of WWII. Yet, the spy emerges from an intricate web of lies about his or her national identity and thus becomes part of the threat. The spy’s reliance on secrecy and deception opens up intersections to gender norms, which naturalise these traits as stereotypically female.

Mitford’s spy parody introduces three female spies: Olga, the pretend spy of fake Russian descent, Florence, the “Mata Hari in her silver foxes”², a German spy disguised as an ultra-religious American, and Sophia, the accidental spy, who becomes involved partly because she is a bored British aristocrat and partly because the German spy network operates from within her London home. While following (and exaggerating) the classic tropes of espionage fiction, Mitford debunks the genre’s celebration of secrecy coupled with a dependence on nationality as well as gender constructs. In my paper, I want to look at how the novel pitches its three female spies against one another to show how secrecy becomes the key constituent of nationality and femininity in spy fiction.

¹Mitford, Nancy. Feltham, Middlesex: Hamlyn Paperbacks, 1979. 173.

²Mitford, 177.

HONY's travels:
the skewed cosmopolitan imaginary of the "Humans of..." phenomenon

Prof. Dr. Anja Schwarz (Potsdam)

The Humans of New York (HONY) project was started by former bond trader Brandon Stanton in 2010 when, upon losing his job, he moved to New York and set out to photograph 10,000 New Yorkers and plot their portraits on a map of the city. With the move to the facebook platform a little later HONY came into its own, as Stanton began to add brief sequences from interviews with his subjects to the photographs he began to post on a daily basis.

The format developed by Stanton has been a huge success. His facebook page currently has 18 million followers around the globe, a coffee-table book with his most successful posts was a New York Times bestseller for 26 consecutive weeks and, in 2013, he was named as one of Time Magazine's 30 under 30 People Changing the World. What is more, there are now at least 100 spin-offs of Stanton's original project, inviting us to get to know the humans of Berlin or Delhi, Palestine or Israel, Amsterdam or Afghanistan, of wars and detention, of different universities and corporations and so on.

My paper discusses the format, vocabulary and narrative tropes that structure these "Humans of ..." stories and seeks to show how the testimonies recorded by Stanton and his disciples are shaped by travelling generic conventions as well as inherent preconceptions of what it entails to be "human".

To Translate or Not To Translate: Cosmopolitanism in the Post-Secular Novel

Mus'ab Abdul Salam (Delhi)

Recent debates within cosmopolitanism have been animated by the notion of translation. Translation implies a transcendence of language, frameworks and traditions and the possibility of the reproduction of meaning and life worlds on a different terrain. Some of the recent theorizations have argued for the necessity of cultural and conceptual translation in order to derive normative principles upon which a cosmopolitan future can be envisioned. In this paper I try to engage with the notion of (un)translatability through an engagement with the genre of 'religious' or post-secular through an engagement with the genre of 'religious' or post-secular novels, focusing on the works of Sudanese author Leila Aboulela. In mobilizing narrative forms such as conversion, confession etc. that can be considered as antecedents to modern novel Aboulela not only explores the possibilities of non-secular novel but also invites us to rethink the paradigm of translation as the viable mode of cosmopolitan future.

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Science Fiction and the Cosmopolitan Imagination

Anupam Siddharth (Delhi)

One of the classical tropes of the science fiction genre is the encounter with the ‘other’, be it in the form of an alien civilization or even the Posthuman/techno-alterity. Such narratives play on the logic of cultural clash either ending in inclusionary resolution or apocalyptic showdown. In our current globalized state, where the encounter with the other is not just part of everyday life but such narratives have saturated the discourse, what Billig calls ‘Banal cosmopolitanism’, cosmopolitanism can serve as a tool for investigating collective cultural psychology, as pointed out by Ulf Hannerz. Hannerz furthermore points out the narcissistic streak in cosmopolitanism, wherein the self is constructed in the space where cultures mirror one another.² Within this context the paper will look at two science fiction works, Arno Schmidt’s *Die Gelehrtenrepublik* (1957) and Reinhard Jirgl’s *Nichts von Euch auf Erden* (2012). Both the works resemble each other in the construction of narrative spaces. Schmidt’s narrative is situated in the cold war crisis whereas Jirgl’s narrative is emblematic of globalization and migration. The paper will try to investigate the idea of cosmopolitan imagination in these works with respect to the narrative spaces and the movement of the figures in these spaces.

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Visualising Aya from Abidjan: Graphic Narratives as World Literature

Anke Bartels (Potsdam)

In discussions of world literature, graphic narratives have been marginalised to a large degree despite the flourishing of the genre in printed and digital formats. This is, of course, especially true for those produced in the Global South and/or languages other than English or French. Nevertheless, by introducing the element of the visual, but also by offering new possibilities to narrate time and space, graphic narratives seem to be able to transcend their location of origin and succeed in reaching a global audience (most often after having crossed linguistic boundaries by means of translation). One prominent example of a border-crossing graphic narrative is *Aya de Yopougon*, which is a coproduction written by Ivorian Marguerite Abouet and drawn by French illustrator Clément Oubrerie, consisting of six volumes originally published by Gallimard between 2005 and 2010. *Aya* has been translated into numerous languages (among them German and English), while it was also adapted into an animated feature film in French and thus crossed genre boundaries. Employing *Aya de Yopougon* as an example of a ‘minor’ literature, I will explore how postcolonial graphic narratives become part of a transnational literary network (while still being dependent on market forces for their ‘success’) as part of a political project that challenges Western representations of and assumptions about Africa by providing new imaginaries and discussing mundane life. The question remains, however, whether graphic narratives like *Aya* manage to make marginalised voices heard on their own terms or if they are ultimately forced to perpetuate Western genre conventions by serving the commodification of the ‘exotic’, to use Graham Huggan’s term.

Double-tongued travelogues and cosmopolitan subjects

Gigi Adair (Potsdam)

This paper considers the literary and generic strategies employed in Indian travel writing from the late eighteenth to late nineteenth century, focusing Dean Mahomet's *Travels* and Bholanauth Chunder's *Travels of a Hindoo*, in comparison with Pandita Ramabai's *American Encounter: The Peoples of the United States* and Vishnubhat Godse's *Adventures of a Brahmin Priest: My Travels in the 1857 Rebellion*. While the generic boundaries and precise features of travel writing are notoriously hard to pin down, most critics agree on its centrality to European imperial expansion and colonialism. What did it mean, therefore, for Indian writers to write travelogues in this period? How did they negotiate or exploit travel writing's generic features to construct cosmopolitan and anticolonial subjectivities? For example, both Mahomet's and Chunder's writing exhibits their extensive use of textual and paratextual styles more commonly associated with European women's writing in the period: the choice of epistolary form for Mahomet, effusive dedications to colonial officials, an apparent embrace of colonial discourses of race, intelligence and civilization. These texts, however, are clearly "double-voiced" (Carl Thompson). Chunder may claim in the preface that it is his "earnest prayer" that "the ascendancy of British rule may long subsist in India to improve the condition of its population," but his travelogue repeatedly and pointedly returns to the theme of the *fall* of successive empires on the Indian subcontinent, suggesting clearly, if implicitly, that British rule, too, will pass. He also locates himself within a very long, diverse and decidedly transnational Indian history that enables the constructing of a cosmopolitan subjectivity not dependent upon or focused upon Britain.

Mode Hybridity as a Cosmopolitan Project: A Look at Oscar Wilde
Harald Pittel (Potsdam)

The flexibility of genre has long been recognized for its potential to transcend traditional boundaries. But is it possible to formulate a political strategy to direct such destabilizations?

My thesis is that such a strategy can be plausibly grounded at the level of literary modes (rather than genre). It seems well worth to take a look at Oscar Wilde, whose engagement with modes might offer an inspiring perspective on literature and identity in a globalized world.

Celebrated for its experimental and diverse explorations in genre, Wilde's oeuvre reveals a common orientation in terms of key modes that we can broadly specify as "romance" and "irony". Literary Modes can be generally defined as abstractions and selections that emerge from genres but surpass their origins to connect with new genres, thus allowing for persistency as well as transformation. For Wilde, "Romance" as a positive principle encompasses a wide and open repertoire of Irish, ancient Greek, Western and Non-Western traditions, while "irony" is in the spirit of negation, centred on a feel for elusiveness but also informed by philosophical traditions and systems.

It is in this sense that Wilde achieved what we could term "mode hybridity": connecting romance with irony could become a key strategy to navigate through the endless possibilities of modernity by using modes as a steering wheel. This offers not only an inclusive writerly approach nearing the idea of world literature, but is deployed by Wilde more fundamentally as a model for identity. Thus mode hybridity could inform the practice of self-scripting as a step towards a planetary understanding of identity.

Art Biennials in the Global South

Tania Meyer (Potsdam)

Since the first Dak'Art Biennial held in the Senegalese capital city of Dakar in 1996, the visual arts production in the Global South has increasingly attracted the attention of curators, gallerists and critics in the metropolitan centres of the global art circuits. Thanks to this development, the numerous art fora in the Tricont countries all over the world have become institutions in their own right that, largely independent of US or European agencies, organize the visibility and interconnectedness of a truly global contemporary art. In this process, it is not only the individual pieces and artworks that are important but also the ways in which they are juxtaposed and positioned in the often site-specific exhibitory spaces of the respective biennials.

In my project I would like to exemplarily reconstruct the poetics and politics of two Southern biennials, namely the Dak'Art 2016 and the 2014 Kochi Muziris Biennale. Drawing on Mieke Bal's notion of the museum as a script for a 'walking narrative' to be enacted by the visitor, I will attempt to delineate (some aspects of) the subtextual structure underlying the curatorial conceptions of these two exhibitions. This will also include the analysis of paratextual elements such as ground plans, exhibition guides, signposts, panels and (where applicable) audio guides, all of which serve orienting and combinatory functions that ensure that visitor will principally comply with the prescribed consecutive order of the individual exhibits. The ensuing 'chronology' or linearity, that forms the pre-generic plot structure of the perambulatory exhibition story, gets sanctioned and retroactively confirmed in the official catalogue of the respective biennial, in which the visitor can iteratively re-experience his/her reading of the respective biennial.

World Literature, Debt, and Some Versions of Tragedy

Dirk Wiemann (Potsdam)

Pascale Casanova has influentially suggested that, ever since its inception in the early 19th century, the institution of world literature has functioned as a ‘bourse of literary values’ analogous to the capitalist world market. Accordingly, literature as economy is based on the mechanisms of a market in which the sole value recognized by all participants – *literary* value – is traded and transacted. It is important to note that ‘literary value’ is not coterminous with but rather alternative to commercial (i.e., ‘real’ economic) value from which the literary work of art is traditionally deemed exempt. Even so, the mere consensus that such a thing as literary value exists ensures that the world-literary system is principally centred on a universally accepted and recognized positive norm (for which Casanova coins the term of the ‘Greenwich Meridian of literature’).

If the assumption of an isomorphism of the economy and literature can be upheld, it would have to be substantially updated to do justice to current global capitalism that increasingly transacts *debt* rather than value. What are the implications for literature when the ‘debt economy’ (Balibar) has effectively deprived the vast majority of people on the planet of the most fundamental horizon of expectation: ‘of the future, that is, of time as decision-making, choice and possibility’ (Lazzarato). How can and how does literature relate to such a condition? Is there – in the footsteps to Casanova’s notion of literature’s self-defined normativity that re-values value itself – a possibility of literature re-possessing the very concept of debt? In my paper I would like to think through these questions by drawing on some recent theoretical discussions of the nexus of literature and debt as well as the current rediscovery of tragedy as a mode of meaning-making under conditions of indebted subjecthood.