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**JFLC**

WORLD LITERATURE BEFORE WORLD LITERATURE

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**Introduction**

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When one prepares to write about World Literature, one usually begins by looking up references to the word “Weltliteratur” in the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, then meandering along through two centuries of literary criticism until one safely approaches the novel literary theories of the globalized 21st century. The persistence of the un-Anglicized word *Weltliteratur* in discussions of Goethe, Marx, et al., is a fossil of a time when expertise in the subject meant fluency in English, French, and German (perhaps along with Latin, ancient Greek, and a few other Romance and Slavic languages); a time when *ein wenig* untranslated German was permissible, even when dispensable. Even when we outlive past assumptions, our disciplines preserve their remains. What should we make of the remains of World Literature? What should we do with our fossilized critical assumptions?

World Literature has often been conceived as a total of the world’s national literatures and their circulation across borders. The term “total” can mean “complete” and it can also refer to a “sum.” World literature is not complete in the sense that many important texts, in particular those written in “minority” languages around the world, are difficult to obtain, unavailable in translation, and neglected by educational and literary institutions. As Hamlet said, “There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your Norton Anthologies.” On the other hand, if World Literature is a sum of all literatures, then it is one that for practical purposes quickly reveals the inequalities in its equations: at any given moment in its history, the field is structured via forces that hierarchize it and prioritize certain texts or literary traditions at the detriment of others. Consequently, even though literary scholars might not openly assert it, Gujarati or Tibetan literatures, for instance, are treated as less valuable than writing in English or French. It is still the case that in most universities (including in India and China) one is more likely to find academic resources dedicated to the latter languages. At the same time, attempting to rectify comparative literary studies, scholars who otherwise bemoan Eurocentrism still fall back on their Eurocentric educational backgrounds and reproduce the status quo; where non-European literatures enter global canons, if and when they do so, they are still subjected to the hegemony of European literary theories.

In particular, pre-modern world literature is often focused on “masterpieces” based on debatable conventions (for example, the centrality of lyric and epic) that contribute further to the neglect of numerous literary contours. A focus on circulation and reception has been proposed for world

literature studies, but many important older texts, though “comparable” with canonical works, have limited circulation and influence. Moreover, this focus still ties literature to the nation-state, as literary mobility implies borders despite the fact that for much of human history, state boundaries did not exist in any modern conception and cultural limits were unfettered by politics.

Therefore, we can talk about two concepts of World Literature. One is an encyclopedic idea, that which describes the untheorized (chaotic) reality of the literatures of the world, as well as cultural exchange and literary dissemination from ancient times to the present moment: acts of translation, adaptation, appropriation, borrowing, plagiarism, etc. have been integral to literary production in all languages. The other World Literature is a knowledge institution, a critical concept often traced back to 19th-century Europe, and which has been further developed in institutional contexts in the past two decades. It is this latter idea that has been criticized as Eurocentric; recent studies of “significant geographies” in Africa and the Indian Ocean, the Silk Road, and pre-modern literary practice “in the multilingual Islamic world(s)” are examples of studies that have revisited the idea of World Literature as a knowledge institution with the aim of expanding it beyond its present limits.

In order to engage and critique the formation of World Literature in the second sense, this special issue has sought to discuss comparative literary studies, and global literary dissemination, outside the often strict frames of analysis established by the dominant nation-based ideas of literature, whether national, international, or transnational. This issue, therefore, proposes to look at the circulation of literature before the rise of European modernity in the 17th and 18th centuries when new notions of the “literary” and the categorizations of “knowledge” divided and hierarchized literatures. The aim is to cross disciplinary boundaries set by knowledge structures and shed light on the dynamics of literary circulation before the rise of capitalism, and market orientation, as the logic of literary diffusion. An outcome of this process will be to challenge inequitable literary frameworks developed by Eurocentric knowledge systems, to contribute positively to a world literature that is more representative of human literary cultures in the world.

Against these ideas, our contributors have responded in a number of interesting ways. The first two papers offer a historical reading of aspects of World Literature. Jean MacDonald writes about World Literature from the perspective of a librarian, relating the history of libraries and the destruction of libraries from ancient history to the present day and highlights the precarious nature of the archive and access to literature. Irma Radiani discusses the historical context of Georgian literature from the 4th century to the modern period, highlighting the cultural richness of the texts, and their connections with eastern and western, European and Asian, cultures.

Next, we have three essays relating to the literatures of the Caribbean and the Americas. Fábio Almeida de Carvalho analyzes a collection of traditional Ye’kwana chants by the indigenous teacher and researcher Fernando Gimenes Ye’kuana. He raises questions about authorship, classification, and transmission in indigenous texts and epistemologies. Anna M. Brígido-Corachán writes about the features of contemporary Zapotec literature from Oaxaca in southern Mexico and its circulation in local and global contexts. These articles provide excellent examples of how literatures circulate beyond the national models in both local and global contexts. Kyrie Miranda-Farnell then

discusses Fray Ramón Pané's *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los Indios*, which offers a description of the myths and culture of the Taino people in Hispaniola in the context of the classical paradoxographical tradition. She highlights how Pané, though a flawed transmitter of indigenous culture, combines Taino storytelling and European literary tradition in his descriptions of animals.

Following these, we have two papers related to Indian literature. Mrinmoy Pramanick addresses the concept of "World" in an Indian context, in particular exploring the connotations of the Sanskrit word *Visva*. He elaborates on the study of World Literature in India and makes a compelling case for the importance of Suniti Kumar Chatterji in the critical traditions of World Literature and introduces the works of many other Indian scholars which deserve to be better known. Forkan Ali focuses on the Bengali Narrative Ballads of *Maimansingha Gitika*, which date from the 16th and early 18th century, and offer a view into the literatures of pre-colonial Bengal and the communities in which they circulated. Finally, we have included an interview with Jonathan Locke Hart who kindly responded to our inquiries about World Literature in a Canadian context and commented on various issues pertinent to this project.

We are very grateful to our contributors: their work speaks for itself and often exceeded (and challenged) the critical concerns we have here laid out and their underlying assumptions. One thing we wanted to highlight within this special issue is the astonishing range of scholarship that has been written in the context of World Literature. So-called "minor" and ultraminor literatures are being read and studied around the world and more effort needs to be made to acknowledge the groundbreaking work that has been done in disciplines that too often are left compartmentalized in the margins. World Literature has been astonishingly successful as an academic subject and publishing market but there remains more to be done to offer institutional support to our world's languages and cultures in local and global contexts. First of all, there needs to be more effort to acknowledge the work of early career scholars and scholars working outside of hegemonic centers: that is, simply to acknowledge that there is a great deal of new scholarship, ideas, and literature which we can read, acknowledge, and promote. Secondly, there needs to be greater institutional space for the study of non-hegemonic languages and literatures. Compared with many other scientific and academic projects, language teaching is cheap: it requires teachers and a few resources. When soliciting papers for this issue we reached out to many scholars in many branches of literature that in the end we were unable to include, for example, experts in North American and Austronesian Indigenous studies and African literatures. Though we never aimed for any degree of comprehensiveness, one thing our search for papers highlighted was that for many of the world's literary fields, there were simply few people in institutional positions we could approach, and those we approached often had far more demands on their work and their time than they could provide. We were confronted by both the concrete and definite interest in many of these institutionally neglected fields as well as their institutional neglect. If World Literature aspires to close attention of original languages and contexts, there needs to be more spaces and more jobs for the people doing the necessary work. We cannot individually master all the world's languages and literatures, but we can help curate and foster spaces for others to do so and (optimistically) for the diversity of World Literature to flourish.