

Literary History after the Nation?

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Literary History after the Nation?" begins with a simple question: Now that many scholars are pressuring the unspoken national and regional assumptions of literary studies, how should we write literary history? The question mark signifies in a few different ways: Should we leave behind the nation as our default cultural boundary when writing literary history; if so, do we need to substitute anything in its place; and how might thinking within or without the nation present new challenges and opportunities as we construct our objects of study? Literary periods have become more porous, while some scholars have abandoned the idea of distinct literary periods and geographically limited literary histories. In my own subfield of modernist studies, the traditional aesthetic, geographic, and historical boundaries of research are, more often than not, held up as straw men, the "old" modernist studies from which the new ought to signal its distance (see Doyle and Winkiel 1994; Mao and Walkowitz 2008; Wollaeger 2012).¹ What is a cause for concern in some

¹ In another important essay about modernist studies, David James and Urmila Seshagiri (2014) show themselves to be strong periodizers in wanting to retain a boundary between modernist and contemporary literatures, but relatively weak historicists in putting some distance between history and literary histories.

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quarters may be regarded as an opportunity for productive reflection in others. The contributors to this special issue have taken up the challenge of thinking about the status of modern literary history in this moment of flux.

In *Why Literary Periods Mattered* Ted Underwood (2013) suggests that literary study has an awkward relationship to the adjacent academic discipline of history (see also Brown 2010). The mostly friendly rivalry between literary scholars and historians is evidenced in the pertinacity of literary periods as the way we subdivide our field. Whereas historians tend to see gradual change over long periods of time, we literary scholars love to emphasize rupture: the Renaissance, Romanticism, and modernism being a few of our favorite moments of radical departure, when the prevailing aesthetic practices of an earlier period are cast aside—suddenly, it would seem. This pattern of rupture makes the most sense if we frame it in an implicitly national or regional container. For the contrast of literary periods to work as an organizing principle of the discipline, literary scholars have long relied on relatively immovable temporal bookends and tight geographic boundaries. Without the nation or the region as part of the discipline's foundation, we risk turning the studied contrasts of literary periods into examples of unrelated cultural difference, or bad infinity, to repurpose a Hegelian term favored by Georg Lukács (1971): eighteenth-century British and Japanese literatures simply come out of different aesthetic traditions, making comparison far chancier, whereas the British Romantics are reacting against the aesthetic standards of their Augustan predecessors, or so the narrative goes. Historians, who rely much less on radical change and implicit contrasts as principles for organizing their subfields, are more apt to think in longer time frames and across wider regions.

Although the global or transnational pivot in literary studies has been enabled by scholars questioning the wisdom of dividing the field into distinct national and regional traditions, the vexed relationship between literary studies and history persists into our current moment. There are significant disagreements among literary scholars with a global perspective, and their differences, broadly speaking, can be explained by how they understand the link between world history and literary history. I think that it makes sense to group these approaches under the labels of strong historicists, weak or flexible historicists, and anti- or nonhistoricists (representatives of this last group often stump for

some variety of deep, transhistorical, cross-cultural formalism instead). Before describing the interventions of this issue's contributors, I will suggest that how we write literary history from a global perspective depends on how we regard the relationships between aesthetic practices and world history.

Strong Historicism

"Always historicize!" are the famous opening words of *The Political Unconscious* (Jameson 1981). Fredric Jameson was the spokesperson for strong historicism in literary studies long before he began contributing to debates in world literature. In *A Singular Modernity* Jameson (2002: 12–13) contributes to the global literature discussion, as he does in other books, by contending that there are not multiple modernities to be found in different parts of the world but one modernity, global in scope, defined by capitalism: "The standardization projected by capitalist globalization in this third or late stage of the system casts considerable doubt on all these pious hopes for cultural variety in a future world colonized by a universal market order." If there are no multiple or divergent modernities for different cultures, neither are there multiple modernisms in the arts. Jameson (1991: 310; 2002: 141) describes the aesthetic of modernism as the artistic expression of "incomplete modernization," or what Leon Trotsky called uneven and combined development.

In *Combined and Uneven Development* the scholars known as the Warwick Research Collective (2015) adapt Trotsky's theoretical perspective to think about literature in a global context. They insist that unfettered capitalism makes conventional literary periods inadequate:

We prefer to speak then not of literary forms spreading or unfolding across empty time (and hence of literary history as being divided into sequential "periods"—classicism, realism, modernism, postmodernism, etc.), but of forms that are brought into being (and often into collision with other, pre-existing forms) through the long waves of the capitalisation of the world—not of *modernism* (or even *modernisms*) but of the *dialectics of core and periphery* that underpin all cultural production in the modern era. (50–51)

For the sake of convenience, scholars may break up modern literatures into distinct periods and regional traditions, but such differences ought to

be read as the effect of a global capitalist order expressed through geographic variation, better known as combined and uneven development. In Jameson's view, shared and expanded by the Warwick Research Collective, history (in the modern era, defined by capitalism) and aesthetics move in lockstep, the inequities of the former determining the idiosyncrasies of the latter. Implicit in the collective's position is a rejection of periodization and national literary traditions as viable ways of imagining literary history: the dialectics of core and periphery replace both regional differences and movements (or discrete periods) as conceptual premises. When we put literary movements into national or regional frameworks, or mark them off into periods, we underestimate the global historical forces that animate the aesthetic realm.²

Not all scholars who enter the global literature debate as strong historicists blame it all on the workings of capitalism. In *The Black Atlantic* Paul Gilroy (1993) writes as a committed antinationalist, regarding slavery and the middle passage, and the prolonged resistance to them, as the defining social experiences of the African diaspora's intellectual tradition. He calls the Black Atlantic "a counterculture of modernity," cutting across national boundaries in an open-ended, fugitive set of relationships across space and time (chap. 1). The version of literary history that Gilroy offers in this book is determined neither by temporal nor by geographic considerations but by political affiliations. Ian Baucom (2005), in a related theoretical turn, reads the culture of the Atlantic world as a kind of elongated eighteenth century, with the dynamics of slavery and finance capitalism that were first developed two and a half centuries ago continuing to determine the course of the present. Gilroy's and Baucom's work elaborates a strain of strong historicism in postcolonial studies, following Edward W. Said's (1978, 1993) pioneering work.³ Shu-mei Shih (2015: 431) offers a succinct overview of strong historicism: "World literature happens in world history, making world-historical perspectives necessary for the study of world literature in synchronic formations and in its longer *durée*." World literature, here, is

² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) read a (mainly) European intellectual history through the development of global capitalism. Jed Esty (2016: 335) argues that the long-running debate of realism versus antirealism in literary culture may "require instead material historical change in order to resolve itself." See also Brown 2006.

³ Other strong historicists in postcolonial studies include Srivinas Aravamudan (1999), Elleke Boehmer (1995), Laura Doyle (2014), and Joseph R. Slaughter (2007).

synchronized to world history, the temporality of the former aligned with the temporality of its counterpart.

The foregoing list is hardly exhaustive, but together these scholars signal a few trends in the global literature discussion. For the strong historicists, national or regional containers do not work especially well for literary study, because the history of cultures exceeds national boundaries. Alexander Beecroft (2015: 241) suggests that the decline of national literary history is symptomatic of political and social change writ large: “There is reason to suppose that the national-literature system may be reaching the limits of its capacity to effectively reduce information [i.e., narrate literary history] at precisely the moment when globalization and the gradual weakening of Euro-American economic hegemony are beginning to suggest the need to incorporate non-European literature more fully into the system.” Lest they be read as monolithic or teleological (with literature serving as a mere adjunct to or symptom of world history), these scholars suggest that cultural production happens through a dynamic relationship with historical forces: literary texts can be complicit in or resistant to the forces of capitalism, colonialism, or slavery, to stick with these particular examples. If this vein of strong historicism in the global literature discussion has an intellectual forerunner, it is probably Lukács, especially his interest in the relationship between European realism and what he calls totality.

Flexible Historicism

Weak or flexible historicists agree that national literary histories may have outlived their usefulness, but they tend to regard literature as an endeavor with forms and techniques that cannot be explained, fully and unambiguously, by the movement of world history. Some of this scholarship evolved as part of a rearguard action in postcolonial theory, where strong historicism has been the norm (see also Dimock 2013; Saint-Amour 2018).⁴ In *What Is a World?* Pheng Cheah (2016: 58–59) argues that a flexible approach to world history allows more room for the analysis of literature’s imaginative capabilities:

⁴ The “weak theory” discussion has provoked a range of responses in modernist studies, available at the *Modernism/Modernity* Print Plus venue (modernismmodernity.org).

Literature does not merely reflect social forces. It is itself an important force in contesting existing hierarchies in the struggle to remake the unequal world created by capitalist globalization. [. . . Postcolonial fiction] suggest[s] that we must rethink world literature on the basis of a world that is not governed by a single unifying principle but is instead the effect of overlapping and frequently conflictual processes of world-making that issue from different local, national, and regional sites.

Cheah's approach shares much with Gilroy's—for instance, in its willingness to grant anticolonial and antiracist writers an important place in his intellectual history—but Cheah is far less willing to allow historical considerations to determine the parameters of his readings. Literature follows an arc that does not track to economic or political history, which is in any case contested in his view; no process of synchronization is visible or audible here. Cheah builds on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's position in *Death of a Discipline*, in which Spivak (2003) urges comparative literature to reinvent itself—as a method of resisting the logic of global capitalism—by reading literary texts as spaces for imagining different futures.⁵ Other thinkers I would describe as flexible historicists, including Eric Bulson (2017), Jed Esty (2012), Matthew Hart (2010), Peter Hitchcock (2010), Martin Puchner (2006), Jahan Ramazani (2001, 2009), and Laura Winkiel (2008), are less concerned with the resistance model of transnational literature: they track specific literary forms, such as the little magazine, the bildungsroman, multivolume fiction, the manifesto, and lyric poetry, as they move around the world. Caroline Levine's (2015) *Forms* provides another example of how formalist and genre theory approaches might attenuate the dominance of world history in global literary history. All these scholars acknowledge the historical circumstances that partly determine the spread of literary forms, but they refuse the suggestion that convincing literary histories must be underwritten by a strong historical narrative. Even a genre closely associated with political movements, such as the manifesto, may enjoy an impressive literary reincarnation by distancing itself from the political energies from which it originally sprang.

⁵ Emily Apter (2013), Peter Hitchcock (2010), Neil Lazarus (2011), and David Scott (2014) also emphasize the potential of literature to resist the logic of history by proposing different solutions to problems of inequity.

Sociologists of transnational cultural production offer another strain of flexible historicism. Pascale Casanova (1999), with *La république mondiale des lettres* (*The World Republic of Letters*), and James F. English (2005), with *The Economy of Prestige*, are probably the best-known scholars to let loose the theoretical insights of Pierre Bourdieu in a transnational context. For Casanova, the field of polite letters is less a republic and more an Olympic Games of the written word. Her version of competition recognizes inequalities by noting that some nations have strong literary reputations while others have fewer cultural resources, but these inequalities do not necessarily align neatly with geopolitical power: nations such as Argentina, Ireland, and Nigeria punch far above their geopolitical weight in the literary ring. English, though he draws very different lessons from world-literary space in his examination of prize culture, tends to agree that the political and economic fields directly influence the course of literature only in special situations. Other scholars who study transnational cultural institutions, such as Sarah Brouillette (2014), Raphael Dalleo (2011), Loren Glass (2013), Gail Low (2010), Nathan Suhr-Sytsma (2017), and I (Kalliney 2013), tend to follow some version of Bourdieu's weak historicism, which interprets the literary field as relatively autonomous, obeying its own rules, procedures, and systems of recognition. Only in particular circumstances do the fields of politics or economics directly intrude on the rules of literary engagement.

If strong historicists have a notable forebear in Lukács, perhaps the flexible historicists in the global literature discussion would point to M. M. Bakhtin (1981) and Raymond Williams (1958). Bakhtin's interest in how the sociopolitical dimensions of language give rise to particular genres, such as the novel, paves the way for the flexible historicists who trace literary techniques and types across national spaces. The development and movement of literary forms, if we follow Bakhtin's lead, can be explained partly, but not exhaustively, by sociohistorical forces. Bakhtin's emphasis on subjugated cultural energies is of obvious significance for the global literary theorists with an interest in the literature of decolonization. Williams, during his prolific career, argued for a dynamic relationship between literary culture, political conflict, and technological development. He was ever careful to remind readers that texts are produced in specific historical and technological contexts, yet from *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* forward he insisted that contexts shape but do not determine aesthetic and intellectual pursuits.

(Strong) Antihistoricism

“Context stinks!” So declares Rita Felski (2015: 151) in *The Limits of Critique*, replying to Jameson across the decades, even down to the punctuation. It is not entirely fair to label Felski and like-minded scholars antihistoricists, for she remains cognizant of the importance of contextual knowledge, but her goal is to make us more alert to texts that speak across temporal and geographic boundaries. Borrowing from Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, Felski contends that “standard ways of thinking about historical context are unable to explain how works of art move across time. We need models of textual mobility and transhistorical attachment that refuse to be browbeaten by the sacrosanct status of period boundaries” (154). At its worst, contextual reading devolves into what the V21 Collective (n.d.) calls “positive historicism,” the “bland antiquarianism” that delights in the “endless accumulation of mere information” of interest only to the academic insider. Felski’s primary goal is not to fashion a literary history after the nation, as I put it in the title of this special issue, but it is easy to see how her position would lend itself to this way of thinking. Strong historicism and excessive respect for periodization, in her view, make for bad criticism.

David Damrosch, Wai Chee Dimock, and Franco Moretti are three of the high-profile scholars who pursue the study of global literature by refusing the allure of historical context, albeit in very different ways. Damrosch (2003) makes it all sound simple in *What Is World Literature?* World literature, in his words, comprises literary texts that move around the world (and across time), in translation or not—as opposed to texts that stay close to home, read only in national or regional contexts. World literature is not a canon of texts but a mode of reading, one that allows readers to appreciate texts with only limited knowledge of historical and cultural contexts (6). The texts most liable to become part of world literature, in fact, are those that tend to “gain” in translation, whereas texts that “lose” in translation tend to remain in local circulation (289). Damrosch’s position has generated a great deal of pushback from transnational literary scholars such as Emily Apter (2013), Brent Hayes Edwards (2003), Christopher GoGwilt (2010), Gayle Rogers (2016), and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (2015), who argue that cultural, economic, and political circumstances have a direct bearing on the practice of translation

and the movement of literature. If *What Is World Literature?* can be said to offer a form of literary history, it does so with jaunty disregard for world history.

Whereas Damrosch relies heavily on close reading skills, Moretti has attracted notice because he starts from a contrary premise: a true theory of world literature should begin with a comprehensive data set and then discern patterns by reading at a distance, rather than up close. Individual writers and texts are not his concern. In “Conjectures on World Literature” and “More Conjectures” Moretti (2000a, 2003) suggests that world literary history must strive to account for the massive unread archive, “the slaughterhouse of literature” (Moretti 2000b), that no one, not even the so-called experts, actually reads. Once we generate enough basic data on these obscure texts, we can begin to discover patterns, such as when the novel form was exported from literary core (England, France) to periphery (Brazil, India, Japan, or Nigeria) and how it was adapted along the way. I take special note of how Moretti deploys concepts of core and periphery. He puts England and France at the epicenter of novel production to ascribe literary influence, not geopolitical power. If there is some confluence of aesthetic and political power in certain places, the terms of this coincidence are not a major part of his reckoning. This is literary history through the macrohistory of forms and genres and literary devices; to do it, we do not need to know very much at all about economic and political history (although I note that elsewhere Moretti is one of the most judicious historicists and most convincing of periodizers in literary studies; see especially Moretti 1987, 1999). It will surprise no one that Moretti’s approach has not been embraced by stalwart close readers or by those who object to his characterization of literary core and periphery as an affirmation of value or worthiness.

In *Through Other Continents* Dimock (2006) also takes up a strong version of antihistoricism, yet her stated goals contrast sharply with those of Damrosch and Moretti. There are no centers or margins in Damrosch’s model, unlike Moretti’s—Damrosch defines world literature as texts that move in any direction. Dimock, in sympathy with many insights of postcolonial theory, seeks to provincialize North American literature by expanding both the temporal and the geographic boundaries of the national canon. North American literature, in her reading, stretches across other cultures, other languages, and other periods. As she says

pithily, “Literature is the home of nonstandard space and time” (4). In her eclectic collection of case studies, Dimock reads canonical US literature through an array of archaeological shards, stray cultural allusions, linguistic fragments, and historical remainders. She resists conventional periodization and national literary canons out of a suspicion that the discipline is too Euro-American-centric: centers and margins are at the heart of her position, although she wishes to scramble the relationship between them. Allying herself with Dimock, Michaela Bronstein (2018: 8) avers, “Literary forms, stripped of their political contexts and ‘original’ meanings, are often precisely the most useful things about the texts of the past for the readers of the future.”

Because these strains of anti- or transhistoricism are incompatible in so many fundamental ways, it is difficult to name one or two literary figures on whose shoulders stands the current generation of global literary critics. Damrosch names Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and his interlocutor Johann Peter Eckermann as two of his guides. Salman Rushdie (1992: 17), who writes that he clings, “obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained” in translation, appears as a more immediate predecessor. Moretti’s proposals for reading world literature at a distance clearly owe much to world historians such as Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, even though Moretti, at least in these provocative essays, provides no historical information to explain the spread of literary forms. Dimock, who is interested in the multicultural history of vernacular languages, relies partly on the insights of Kamau Brathwaite (1984), whose *History of the Voice* makes a strong argument for the vitality of oral traditions to poetic practice. Of course, no one appreciates the reverberations of particular literary forms, across historical periods and national traditions, better than Erich Auerbach (1953).

I am struck by how many discussants in the global literature debate contest the validity of conventional literary periods even as they diverge markedly on the usefulness of world history for conceiving literary history. Practitioners of transnational literary studies agree on very little aside from the inadequacy of conventional literary periods, often tethered to what Eric Hayot (2012: 6) calls “Eurochronology.” I did not anticipate this before I put my thoughts down in writing; I started off thinking that my remarks would be about cultural geographies and

the relationship between literature and world history. The Warwick Research Collective, the most committed of the strong historicists, states unequivocally that our discipline's standard periodization is an obstacle; most of the flexible historicists are willing to range freely across periods as well as regions; and of the antihistoricists I have considered here, each is more eager than the next to ignore or contest the sanctity of period markers. The past tense of Underwood's title, *Why Literary Periods Mattered*, is more incisive than I realized when I began thinking about this topic. It is beyond the scope of this introductory essay to speculate at length about this trend, but I believe that it reflects a combination of intellectual and institutional factors: (1) overreliance on revolutionary novelty as the defining feature of literary periods—an acute problem in literary histories of the twentieth century—has led many observers to wish away literary periods instead of refine how we make use of them;⁶ (2) the decline of “French” theory (and New Historicism, though to a lesser extent) in North America and the emergence of diverse new methods, all jockeying for influence; (3) even as new methods have impacted literary studies in the past two decades, the internal pressure to expand the geographic range of canons has continued unabated, which in turn has encouraged diverse segments of the discipline to be less respectful of period boundaries in the search for new materials; (4) the long-standing crisis in the humanities, and perhaps its recent intensification, leaves scholars feeling as if everything were up for grabs, particularly in the way that literature departments advertise job openings: when there are so few positions, there is less incentive to cling to conventional parameters and greater pressure to think more creatively, less narrowly. It is too early to know if discussions in world literature will lead us to abandon literary periods, but Marshall Brown (2001: esp. 309–16) reminds us that dissatisfaction with periodization is probably as old as the writing of literary history itself.

The contributors to this special issue show us why we should continue imagining literary history and how we can do so “when the objects of analysis are out of place,” as Simon Gikandi (2016: 1198) puts it,

⁶ Marshall Brown (2010) argues that our conceptions of literary periods depend too much on finding evidence of revolutionary change; instead, we might recognize how scattered, relatively uncoordinated experiments in the arts gradually cohere into something recognizable as a movement.

uneasy within conventional periods or national literary traditions. In “Alternatives to Periodization: Literary History, Modernism, and the ‘New’ Temporalities,” Susan Stanford Friedman wonders if Albert Einstein’s theory of general relativity and its refutation of objective, linear temporality have any bearing on how we construct literary periods. As she does in *Planetary Modernism* (Friedman 2015), she shows us how to read with modernism by expanding our sense of what modernity is, where it unfolds, and when it happens. Friedman notes how modernist texts often represent time “as multilayered, fractured, and nonlinear.” Virginia Woolf’s (1955, 1969, 2000) novels *To the Lighthouse*, *Between the Acts*, and *Orlando* bend and stretch and fold time in different ways, leading Friedman to argue that Woolf’s basic insights permit us to challenge conventional forms of literary periodization. This feature of Woolf’s writing makes her especially useful for intertextual appropriation by artists working from oppositional vantage points, such as the remix specialist Kabe Wilson (2014), whose recycling techniques show how reconfigurations of canonical writers can contest the social exclusions endemic to the period labeled modernism.

Marijeta Bozovic’s essay, “The Voices of Keti Chukhrov: Radical Poetics after the Soviet Union,” also suggests that avant-garde poets and performance artists thrive in a sort of promiscuous temporality, fusing older utopian projects with future-oriented collectives to imagine a more dynamic relationship between the history of the Soviet Union and contemporary, multicultural Russia. In Bozovic’s reading, Chukhrov’s poetry and performance attempt to harness the solidarities of revolutionary communism to create subaltern collectives in post-Soviet Russia. Chukhrov’s poetry seems to operate in a geography, genre, and temporality all its own. The geography is knowingly post-Soviet, ambivalently Russian, and self-consciously multicultural. The poetic mode is something collective and dramatic rather than lyric in form, the lyric being too closely associated with individualism. The mood and temporality tack between forms of Soviet revolutionary optimism stripped of naïveté, post-Soviet despair of resurgent Russian nationalism, and futuristic, uncertain anticipations of “a feminine sublime.” Bozovic’s essay ends in an interesting place. To grapple with the multiplicity of the contemporary avant-garde, transpiring across global space, disseminated through multiple media, and using different genres, she suggests that we need to

loosen our attachment to the literary. The skills of close reading and book history must learn to coexist with the techniques of ethnographic writing, cultural sociology, and new media studies, as well as with the old standby of social history. Writing a literary history of the present requires a less narrow conception of what counts as literary—and greater awareness of our own positions in increasingly entangled and interconnected global artistic and academic communities.

Hayot makes this point even more emphatically in his contribution, “Literary History after Literary Dominance.” To write literary history at the present juncture, it is not the nation we need to see past but the blinders imposed by refined notions of the literary. The nation as a geopolitical reality, Hayot rightly points out, is by no means finished, as the resurgent nationalism in many nation-states demonstrates. In his account, two things have changed in the contemporary world. First, Euro-American economic and political dominance is no longer relatively secure or stable, meaning that literary historians in the Euro-American academy must contend with contrasting cultural perspectives if they hope to think in historically responsive ways (this is a point of convergence for the special issue as a whole: how to write literary history without assuming the dominance of western European culture).⁷ If in the 1940s Auerbach could study the history of realist literature in an exclusively European context without anticipating a backlash, the same is not true today. Second, and more provocatively, Hayot argues that literary history in our moment “comes not after the nation, in a strong sense, but after an age in which literature was dominated by the national idea.” The days when literature could tell readers something meaningful and essential about national cultures—the novel, he suggests, served this function particularly well at the peak of its powers—are over. If we want to learn about representations of larger political units, “a nation or region or even the globe,” we had better look at media forms other than the literary, especially the long-format television series. In this Hayot seems to agree with Levine (2015) and Lauren M. E. Goodlad (2015), who make comparable points about long-format narrative in the age of streaming video content. What literary history can do, however, is tell us something meaningful about the historical relationship between media

⁷ Caroline Levine and B. Venkat Mani (2013) regard the world literature discussion as an opportunity to reflect on the expansiveness of cultural production.

and social forces, allowing us to theorize how forms of representation work within and against political structures.

Harris Feinsod's essay, "World Poetry: Commonplaces of an Idea," offers an implicit response to Hayot. If the novel once enabled readers to take the pulse of national culture, the category of world poetry may permit us to understand the emotional heartbeat of modern literature by studying the "cosmopolitical desires" of writers who sought to cross national frontiers with their verse. As Feinsod puts it, the figures who built a twentieth-century literary database of world poetry show "a desire to rescale poetry as a verbal practice and as a form of knowledge into a social imaginary satisfactory for the grounding of a world community in rapid transformation." It is no accident that the cultural diplomacy initiatives of the Cold War era, with unprecedented material resources at their disposal, allowed the advocates of world poetry to fashion something like a global infrastructure. Despite our tendency to amnesia in the contemporary moment, the forms of world poetry that have reemerged since 1990 have clear precursors in other projects, traces carried over from other geopolitical systems. Whereas Hayot questions whether literature continues to provide compelling accounts of our historical experience, Feinsod suggests that doing a genealogy of the term *world poetry* may reattach some historical threads to a concept that its practitioners tend to treat as if it were a new fabrication.

Katerina Clark's essay, "The Soviet Project of the 1930s to Found a 'World Literature' and British Literary Internationalism," also takes up the question of transnational cultural institutions overlooked in the world literature discussion. The Soviet Union was an early experimenter in the field of soft power, seeking aesthetic and ideological collaborators as early as the 1920s; the United States was a comparatively late entrant, starting its major cultural outreach in the 1940s. The Soviet-oriented literary networks that Clark documents challenge the reliance by Casanova, Moretti, and others on a "Greenwich meridian" of literary culture or on center-periphery patterns of exchange. Between the wars, ideological sympathy induced numerous writers and cultural agents in the Anglophone regions to affiliate with Soviet-sponsored initiatives. In that light, John Lehmann, the editor of *New Writing* who could make or break reputations, appears rather as a figure on the margins of Moscow's literary orbit. Yet rather than a top-down endeavor preaching socialist realism to scattered ideological purists, Soviet cultural diplomacy was a

pragmatic and patchwork affair, resulting in surprising collaborations that ramified further in the anticolonial literatures of the twentieth century.

Two overarching questions preoccupy the contributions to this special issue. First, what is the relationship between literary forms and world history? In other words, should the history of literature begin with a dialectical process, as Jameson and his sympathizers would have it, or does a form of relation, adapted from Édouard Glissant, offer a better chance of honoring literary practices by opening them to historical indeterminacy and imaginative plurality? Second, what is the appropriate data set—or canon of texts, to use a less fashionable terminology—for doing literary history in a global setting? We could embrace computational methods, following Moretti's example, or trawl far and wide for inputs, as the media studies approach might have it, or defend our traditional home turf, with the techniques of deep, close readings hinging on representative examples, as Damrosch does. The contributors assembled here each have interesting things to say about the drawbacks and benefits of these approaches.

The essays that follow highlight both the challenges and the possibilities of writing literary history when the cultural parameters of the nation, and of the capacities of literature to imagine them, are changing in contradictory ways, with a global economy that erodes national sovereignty and the electoral backlash of populist ethnonationalisms. A generation ago literary historians faced the prospect of reimagining the discipline without the implicit structures of European culture holding the enterprise together. In the present moment we face the challenge of understanding the history of literary culture when there is so much internal and external pressure on literary studies. Yet I cling stubbornly to the idea that contemplating the history of literature will better equip us to articulate the relevance of our work in a chaotic present and an uncertain future.

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