

## TEXTS IN TRANSMISSION

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TEXTS MOVE. Sometimes, their journey ends almost as soon as it begins: from the writer's computer screen to the desktop printer, back to the writer-as-reader and straight onto the pile of discarded paper. Other texts come to us from long ago and far away; many will leave us behind, moving on to times and places that we will never experience. Texts can travel slowly over centuries or even millennia, spread like wildfire through today's globalized book market or on social media platforms, become treasured travel companions for specific groups, disappear, reappear, or get lost completely. On their way, they shift and change but always connect people (readers, writers, scribes, printers, sellers, collectors, etc.) as well as objects because, in Karin Littau's words, 'the production and distribution of the labours of human imagination are unthinkable without these material carriers'.<sup>1</sup> Littau refers in the first place to the more obvious vehicles of the written word, but such material carriers could also include something as apparently banal as a souvenir mug inscribed with a quote from Virginia Woolf.<sup>2</sup>

Circulation is thus an essential element of the life of literature, and scholars have developed diverse approaches to this mobile quality of texts while continuing to grapple with its complex implications, both within and outwith the texts under study. During the last decades this interest in the past, present and future of texts in motion has been fuelled by the understanding, often uneasy, that we live in 'an age of globalization', to cite the phrase used in the title of the 2006 report on the state of the discipline by the American Comparative Literature Association.<sup>3</sup> The concomitant rise and rise of world literature studies is an attempt to discover ways of reading suited to a connected globe, a project that has been contested by scholars emphasizing the need for located approaches and the 'advantage of thinking of significant geographies over "world"' because "'world" is always a view from somewhere'.<sup>4</sup> This heightened spatial awareness goes hand in hand with a focus on entanglements that complicates existing narratives about the circulation of literature. Questions perhaps more typically raised in translation studies and cultural transfer studies have thus acquired a new urgency in fields such as comparative literature, book history and periodical studies. The desire to develop a better understanding of mediators, networks and places that facilitate transmission has also contributed to a renewed interest in biography, one which is currently flourishing for instance in Spain.<sup>5</sup>

This Virtual Special Issue recontextualizes and recirculates studies on transmission from the rich archive of *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. Many of us have experienced how flows of information have changed in recent years. They are accelerated, disrupted and rechannelled, slowly or abruptly, and often with wide-reaching consequences for individuals and communities. The year 2022 seems therefore to be an apposite moment to think about past explorations of connectedness via the circulation of texts, not only to consider the development of critical inquiry into the topic and how it connects to current trends, but also to help us reflect on our own positionalities as scholars interested in questions of transmission.

The opening article, Stephen Hart's succinct presentation of 'Literary Print Culture in the Spanish Colonies' (2000), asks fundamental questions of what texts are made public and how in a specific society, and explores the consequences that constraints on publication have on circulation and transmission. The case of Spanish America is particularly interesting, as the development of early modern print culture – the first printing press in the Americas started to operate in the 1530s – intersects with the power structures of an early modern colonial empire; Hart points out the similarities between official literary culture and the colonial extraction of precious metals. The production of printed books was strictly controlled through licensing in the name of the King, and financed by patronage, although 'that maecenal system was undermined by a subaltern culture which sought routes other than viceregal publication for its social expression' (p. 104), such as the production of manuscripts.

Hart's overview article can only hint at the problematic articulation of subaltern voices within official literary culture, especially in a colonial context. This topic moves to centre stage in Fionnghuala Sweeney's 2004 dissection of Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo* [*Autobiography of a Slave*] / *History of the Early Life of the Negro Poet, Written by Himself*, the only life narrative by an enslaved person in Spanish America written in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> From its very inception – a commission by the white Cuban intellectual Domingo del Monte – to the printed English version by the Irish and Catholic abolitionist R. R. Madden (1840), the text was fashioned to cross 'a divide not only linguistic and ethnic, but ethical: from Catholic, Hispanophone Cuba to the largely Protestant liberal world of Anglo-American abolitionism' (p. 404). The result, a 'borderland' and 'networked text' (p. 402), nevertheless failed to gain traction among its target readership, in part because it did not conform to the developing generic conventions of US slave narratives.

Manzano's autobiography makes visible to what extent a text is shaped by its transmission, precisely because his account was transported from a precarious discursive position towards the centre, a direction of travel that denaturalizes practices of publishing and reading that might otherwise be taken for granted. In the case of older written texts, these practices are often difficult to reconstruct, but the form of the texts can help us draw conclusions about how they may have circulated among their contemporaneous audience. Thus, Roger M. Walker's 1971 article demonstrates how comparing the two surviving manuscripts of *El libro del caballero Zifar*

[*The Book of the Knight Zifar*] (dating respectively from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) and the first printed edition (Seville, 1512) yields clues that complicate assumptions about the aural reception of this medieval narrative. Subtle changes in the use of oral formulae also point toward a slow process of remediation, which later gathered speed as attempts to reach new and more numerous audiences were made. Such is the case of the French Bibliothèque universelle des romans [Universal Library of Novels], which published versions of epic poems during the two decades before the Revolution, with the purpose of ‘mak[ing] known to the general reading public works of earlier centuries’, as Elizabeth A. Babister puts it in ‘Old French without Tears: The *Chanson de geste* in the Late Eighteenth Century’ (1979) (p. 27). The author illustrates the wide-ranging transformation which the texts underwent, making them presumably more enjoyable for their contemporaneous readers. Very likely, the subsequent Romantic rewritings of medieval themes were more inspired by the Bibliothèque universelle than earlier versions of the medieval stories.

The two articles that follow Babister’s are dedicated to questions of transmission in the periodical press, arguably the modern medium par excellence. In ‘Plotlifting: The Transposition of French Stories in the Nineteenth-Century Spanish Press’ (2016), Elizabeth Amann studies a practice of camouflaged transmission that was apparently as widespread as it is difficult to detect today. Spanish authors would rewrite short narratives that were originally published in French periodicals without acknowledging the source of their inspiration. The comparison between the source texts, the usually heavily domesticated versions and translations into Spanish marked as such provide fascinating insights into what periodicals regarded as appropriate for their readers. At the same time, ‘plotlifting’ cannot be separated from the all-important practical concerns which people who worked for the press had to weigh, from the need to make ends meet financially to the imperative to produce a high volume of content at speed, as well as attitudes toward translation and, I would like to add, legal considerations at a time when the creation of international copyright law transformed both the circulation of texts and the very idea of authorship.<sup>7</sup>

While periodicals targeting a mass readership would on occasion hide their function as vehicles for rewriting and transfer, literary and scholarly periodicals could thrive because they displayed their knowledge of literatures from abroad, as Peter France demonstrates in his 2010 study of the *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in the first half of the nineteenth century. Embracing a cosmopolitan attitude, especially in its early years, *Blackwood’s* even published several pseudo-translations. Thus, the periodical ‘casts something of a mocking shadow’ on its ‘very real commitment [...] to world literature’ (p. 10). Nevertheless, the magazine normalized reading in translation from a wide range of languages without making the transfer process itself invisible. Its success suggests that ‘the public must have been willing to explore and sometimes to take to its heart new writing from abroad’ (p. 14), and the accessible and flexible form of a magazine offered an ideal opportunity to do so.

But who were these groups who sought out opportunities for engaging with texts, ideas, people and languages from abroad, and how did their activities shape their societies? In 'Reading Clubs, Language Societies and Female Education in *Fin-de-siècle* Copenhagen' (2017), Lene Østermark-Johansen shows that the answer to these fundamental questions often lies in the patient study of a rather motley collection of carefully compiled archival sources, in this case ranging from institutional reports about membership and activities to library catalogues, personal correspondence, memoirs, pictures and buildings. In an approach reminiscent of Mario Valdés's focus on spatial and institutional nodes,<sup>8</sup> the resulting narrative about the Danish capital as 'a literary and linguistic space' (p. 276) traces people's active participation in cultural exchanges – organized and individual – from a specific address, 47 Vimmelskaflet, where the Copenhagen Language Society had its seat.

The preponderance of Spanish and French examples so far in this discussion reflects aspects of the Eurocentric history of Modern Languages studies in the UK. In the closing article of this Virtual Special Issue, Flore Chevallier broadens the horizon to include imagined East-West connections with her 2011 study of Dai Sijie's *Balzac et la petite tailleuse chinoise* [*Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*], a novel that puts the transmission of literary texts at its centre. Reviewers in Europe and North America celebrated the work as a homage to Western literature, based on their partial reading of a hybrid text which strangely echoes the protagonists' partial reading of Balzac and company. Both groups appropriate their reading material according to their needs and obviate those elements that invite critical reflection, which, in the case of the characters in the novel, has dire consequences for others. Chevallier concludes that 'the novel's appeal in a contemporary market derives from the exoticization of both East and West' (p. 72), a problem that is made visible in the novel thanks to the lucid character of the Old Miller. The worth of his traditional knowledge is ignored – it will only enter wider circulation after being brought in line with hegemonic ideology, for the personal benefit of one of the characters.

Each of the eight articles that constitute this Virtual Special Issue focuses on an individual case. Read together, they highlight the relational thinking that underlies the very idea of studying texts in transmission and the transmission of texts. Thus, this issue extends an invitation to follow potential connections between texts, objects and people, to zoom in and out of highly complex, dynamic networks. If it is true that it is often difficult to see 'the forest for the trees', we may gain new insights by focusing on the conditions of their interconnectedness instead.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Karin Littau, 'Translation and the Materialities of Communication', *Translation Studies*, 9.1 (2016), 82–113 (p. 83).

<sup>2</sup> Rita Felski, 'Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 53.4 (2016), 747–65 (p. 750).

<sup>3</sup> *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. by Haun Saussy (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Karima Laachir, Sara Marzagora and Francesca Orsini, 'Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies: For a Ground-up and Located Approach to World Literature', *Modern Languages Open*, 1.19 (2018), 1–8 (pp. 5, 4).

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Pura Fernández, *365 relojes: Vida de la Baronesa de Wilson (1833–1923)* (Madrid: Taurus, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Juan Francisco Manzano, *Poems by a Slave in the Island of Cuba, Recently Liberated; Translated from the Spanish, by R. R. Madden, M. D. with the History of the Early Life of the Negro Poet, Written by Himself* (London: Thomas Ward and Co., 1840). The first edition of the Spanish version I am aware of is Juan Francisco Manzano, *Autobiografía, cartas y versos*, ed. by José Luciano Franco (Havana: Municipio de La Habana, 1937).

<sup>7</sup> See César Domínguez, 'Law: Making Authorial Personhood for the World, 1878–89', in *World Authorship*, ed. by Tobias Boes, Rebecca Braun and Emily Spiers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 195–209.

<sup>8</sup> See Mario J. Valdés, 'Rethinking the History of Literary History', in *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, ed. by Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 63–115.