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Q: Literary history, be it national, local, or regional, is perhaps the most conservative form of literary study, with many claiming that the method is outmoded. What can literary histories do to overcome both the risk of obsolescence and their inherent conservatism?

A: I would not describe myself as a literary historian and have at times actively resisted this approach in my own work, in line with influential recent arguments made by the likes of Eric Hayot and Susan Stanford Friedman, both of whom I have discussed with my students in class. Having said that, I don't think that literary histories are necessarily *inherently* conservative. What the recent, period-sceptic approaches to historical scholarship have shown, crucially, is that there are other ways of organising literary study that produce different insights and enable access to different forms of knowledge, including insights into forms of knowledge and experience that would have been marginalised by traditional forms of literary history (hence the perception that literary history is an outmoded and politically conservative form).

However, while these recent critiques of periodisation have exposed the *limitations* of this approach, as well as a conservatism that inevitably results from many decades worth of literary historical scholarship being dominated by white middle-class men, I would tentatively suggest that literary history as a methodology can continue to have value, including value that might be seen as more radical or progressive in nature, if it is applied in innovative ways. One need only look at the formation of alternative literary histories—feminist, queer, POC—to see that the act of tracing historical lineages can help to visualize and solidify important counter narratives to the status quo. I say this with the important caveat that in some cases, these alternative histories, or temporalities, themselves overtly resist periodicity, so I accept that there are complexities here. Generally speaking, though, literary histories in the plural, whose centres of control sit firmly within the communities these histories are intended to represent, can function as vital alternative mappings of the world.

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Of course, literary history as an approach continues to have major limitations, as any approach does, but an open-minded version to literary history, especially one that accounts for the ways in which different histories can overlap and interact with each other (as well as the differences and polyphonies that will inevitably exist within the same literary histories) can sit alongside more overtly radical approaches as a useful tool for tracing influences and nascent traditions. They can do this in a way that helps to construct a narrative about what is going on in a part of the world, for a particular group of people, at a particular moment in time. In this sense, literary histories do not have to be limited to place but can instead be built around literary scenes or styles: the internet and an evolving global literary marketplace have ensured that spheres of influence are no longer tied to nation, locality or region in the same way that they arguably once were.

Q: Literary histories are known for their preoccupation with identity. Canons are made or broken by them, ideologies are affirmed or restored, and writers are recovered or left out. As intellectual enterprises that hold a certain authority over a segment of culture, can they become a culture in and of themselves?

A: Yes, and I think that this is usually an example of literary histories at their worst. As with any kind of historical methodology, literary history is at its best when it is treated as an approach—or a tool—for understanding the relationships between certain groups of texts over time, rather than as an empirical or monolithic entity in its own right. Just as Bourdieu was right to encourage scepticism towards notions of 'distinction' derived from a perceived sense of ownership of, or gatekeeping over, the field cultural production, in my view it is healthy to maintain a similar wariness about what it is, exactly, that is going on in terms of the instrumentalisation of history in relation to *power*, when a particular strand of literary history attains the status of cultural capital in its own right. Historical approaches should help us to understand the sociological processes involved in their own formation, rather than attempting to hide these processes. As soon as that understanding starts to become overshadowed by a commodification of historical knowledge, the historical process begins to lose its value as a public good and instead effectively begins to be privatised, in the sense that the historical knowledge it enables becomes a means for a select group of gatekeepers to signify their ownership over this knowledge.

By saying this, I don't mean to do down the value of expertise: of course, there will always be small groups of historians who have greater knowledge of a particular history than others. Likewise, there will also be instances, especially in the case of alternative or minority histories, in which the question of ownership is politicised in important ways: it is important, for instance, for

ownership of LGBTQI+ literary histories to be in the hands of LGBTQI+ people. My point is that this is a different sort of ownership to the privatising ownership of a cultural elite, whether in the form of a careerist academic, a heteropatriarchal canon, or a marketing strategy that tries hard to sell book X to customers who are fans of bestselling authors Y and Z ('if you liked that, you'll love this!').

It is possible for ownership to be public in the sense that this ownership is geared towards the benefit of the people involved. As long as historicisation is used as a self-reflective methodology rather than a commodity in its own right, then this kind of ownership is possible and can even be genuinely progressive, politically. There has been a critical turn against identity studies in certain sections of literary and critical theory in recent years, but recent upturns in movements like BLM and transgender rights show that identity remains as important as ever and need not be antithetical to more structural or materialist approaches. The two sometimes go hand-in-hand, and literary histories—when done well—can help to articulate this connection.

Q: For literary histories, literary periods are, first and foremost, instruments of contrast and vehicles of legitimization. Oftentimes, periodization speaks more of literary historiography's status anxiety and disciplinary autonomy than of their function in describing and investigating literary histories. Does periodization still matter beyond preserving the authority of periodization itself?

A: As I've mentioned already, I'm not a literary historian, and I find myself here in the odd position of defending it to some degree, despite being completely on board with the many legitimate criticisms to which it has recently been subjected: without doubt, it is an approach that has been guilty of commodifying periods in the conservative ways that the questions in this Q&A so far have identified. Moreover, it is depressing that in the academic job market, so many jobs in literary studies continue to be predicated so specifically upon period in a way that actively encourages applicants to frame themselves in these conservative terms: 'Lecturer in Nineteenth Century Literature', 'Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Literature' etc. (Periodicity is also often implicit in job titles that don't overtly mention it, such as those focused on World Literature or Postcolonial Literature). In PhD research training sessions, students are often told that combining periods or places can be a strength, and I totally agree with this from a research perspective (I do it myself), but when it comes to job applications, this sort of approach can sometimes make it hard for hiring panels to justify your 'fit' with the advertised profile.

Ultimately, however, I don't think that the response to this conservatism should be to put literary history in straightforward competition with other approaches: different approaches can exist alongside each other and productively complement each other. While it is right to question the limitations of the historiographical approach as it has been traditionally practised, I don't think it is

of that much benefit to anyone to throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. Just because I tend to resist the worst aspects of periodisation in my own work, this doesn't mean that I believe the literary historical approach is somehow completely redundant. The impulse in academia, at the moment, to frame methodologies as being in fierce competition with each other is arguably a slightly worrying reflection of the neoliberal model of competition that is currently reshaping institutions and is ultimately antithetical to the open-minded, collaborative inquiry that academic research is supposed to be about.

Yes, we should continue working to find new ways of organising literary study, or even subjecting the academic impulse to 'organise', itself, to scrutiny. But the fact is that periodicity continues to hold a huge sway in the cultural imaginary, and that is largely down to the efforts of cultural critics—understood in the broadest sense, from giants like Eliot and the Bloom all the way through to Gen Z bloggers and BookTokers—for whom the confluence of time and space offered within the boundaries of a 'moment' or a 'period', fictitious as it may be, has remained an alluring method for conceptualising the dissemination of ideas between texts. In my opinion, decentering and destabilising literary history is more important than dismantling it. The latter is impossible, anyway: the big literary periods we have all been taught about at school and university are not going to disappear from the cultural consciousness anytime soon.

Q: How is contemporaneity, as a historiographic milestone, negotiated in a global context?

A: In our Introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction,* Robert Eaglestone and I responded to this question by drawing on Teju Cole and Judith Butler, both of whom have written in different ways about the limits of the contemporary, and about its relativity. In his globetrotting photograph/prose-poem travelogue, *Blind Spot*, Cole reflects upon his travels by saying that 'What is interesting is to find … the less obvious differences of texture: the signs, the markings, the assemblages, the things hiding in plain sight in each city or landscape' (2017, 200). He mentions these differences as an important qualification to a broader point that he makes about the 'continuity' between different global cities, which are connected with and reflect each other in their diversity (2017, 200). Difference and sameness, between such cities, start to blend together as categories. For Cole, the global contemporary is something that is shared, to some degree, between the world's urban centres. Butler, meanwhile, makes a similar point about the contemporary being limited by geography, only placing a greater emphasis on regional power than on urban centres: the contemporary is a temporal category, and 'temporality is organized along spatial lines' (2009, 101). What is considered contemporary within Western culture is not necessarily going to be experienced as such outside of it.

Both Cole and Butler are, of course, making versions of a claim that was popularized in cultural criticism around a decade ago by Giorgio Agamben, when in his essay, 'What is the Contemporary?', he influentially wrote that 'Contemporariness is … a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it' (2011, 11). That is, we are contemporary with those with whom we share a temporality: we share a habitation of that temporality, while also perceiving it from slightly different angles, hence breaking it down into a multitude of smaller temporalities, which shift around and change as we move through our lives. As Robert and I mention in out Introduction to the *Routledge Companion*, the literary critic Lionel Ruffel articulates a version of this idea nicely in his book, *Brouhaha: Worlds of the Contemporary*, when he writes that the contemporary 'feels more like a concordance of temporalities than a single time, a concordance that is also more subjective that collective: it's not postulating that a single, unique, unified present is shared by the community but rather that what the community shares is a subjectivized polychronicity' (2018, 178).

In the opening lecture of the 'Contemporary Literature' module that I convene at Oxford Brookes University, I unpack Ruffel's idea of a 'subjectivized polychronicity' for my students by asking them to imagine that they are sitting in the front row of an IMAX cinema, from which point it's not possible to see the whole screen without moving their heads around (I borrowed this metaphor from a similar passage in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*). I tell the students that they can all see only a small section of the screen clearly at any one time, and that if they get out of their seats and press theirs face right up against the screen, they'll start to see the picture breaking up into little colourful pixels. This is what studying the contemporary is like: it's sometimes hard to see the bigger picture when we're so immersed in the picture ourselves. And that's why I emphasise to them that seminar discussion is particularly important on a module about contemporary culture: individually, they're all only looking at their tiny part of the screen, but by talking to each other, they'll be able to start joining the dots to see the bigger picture. I think this metaphor is useful beyond the seminar, too. It's now a truism to say that the contemporary world is increasingly fragmented along partisan lines: perhaps more genuine communication between different factions, as opposed to rhetorical point-scoring, might provide a first step towards a way out some of the huge global challenges that affect us all: racial capitalism, disease, climate breakdown. Again, of course, such conversations are inflected by power, and as such place a particular onus on those in positions of relative privilege to listen and change.

Q: How do you comment on the legitimacy of literary histories written by a single author? Should literary histories become the domain of research collectives?

A: I would question how useful it is to frame this question in terms of 'legitimacy'. Given what we know about the way histories are made and how partial they necessarily are, it is clearly no longer legitimate for a single literary historian to present their own work as the 'definitive' version. However, if a literary history by a single author is framed as just that—*a* literary history, or a subjective part of a bigger conversation—then there is nothing wrong with that and there is no reason why it can't continue to have value as one form amongst many in contemporary debates.

Obviously, collectives are generally useful in this regard, as they necessarily encourage this sort of conversation, but of course collectives can themselves sometimes end up perpetuating the same sorts of historical oversights to which an individual historian might fall prey, especially if they are made up of researchers from similar backgrounds and with similar worldviews. Having said that, partiality is not a bad thing in and of itself: a working-class collective, or a feminist/LGBTQI+ collective, or an indigenous rights collective must necessarily be partial in its research aims, in order to represent the interests of those whose histories that have traditionally been marginalised within mainstream scholarship. So yes, when it comes to literary histories, collectives can generally offer fuller and more multifaceted accounts than individual historians, as long as they are able to remain self-reflective about their own collective subjectivities. Likewise, individual historians can benefit greatly from being members of a collective.

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