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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 don't think anyone really does traditional, canon-based literary history anymore in the wake of late 20th century post-structuralist and new historicist approaches. In the 21st century there has been a broad move away from national paradigms of literary history towards systems theory and comparativist methodologies that foreground the horizontal circulation of texts across linguistic and/or spatial and temporal borders, and hence work to undermine both the Eurocentrism and elitism embedded in comparative and national literary studies. World literature studies and translation studies have been the fields most implicated in this renovation of literary history. Narratology and comparative poetics offer useful tools for examining the history of traveling genres. Fabulous new collaborative initiatives like OCCT's Prismatic Translation project deploy the translated work of literature as the productive site of multiple literary histories plotted across diverse geographies, languages and traditions. Moreover, in my own work overall I am very much inclined to agree with critics like Eric Hayot that a concern with the present should frame the way we go about investigating the past.

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: Very much so, but this is mainly true in relation to academic culture and university curricula. I think that outside these narrow cultural enterprise zones,

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the question of identity can and should be defined by historical thinking involving much broader—more genuinely experimental and less policed—areas of creative media. I'm thinking here of popular musical cultures for example, jazz or hiphop, and the ways in which these go about constructing fluid and openly sourced performative traditions and historical repertoires that bring together image, sound and both the written and spoken word.

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: I do think periodization still matters, but only as an open-ended and self-conscious revisionist process that centers an ecumenical and experimental view of locations and temporalities. I recently participated in a workshop on “the literary 1980s” in the Maghreb and Middle East. One of the central and ultimately most productive problematics of the workshop turned out to be the whole question of the utility of periodization as a heuristic exercise for thinking precisely about the present, which in the Arab world, since the revolutions of 2011, is organized around the recursive trope of ‘failure’ that arrives in the contemporary moment via the historical trauma of 1967. In other words, how do our locations in the present moment (spatial and temporal) ultimately shape the way we periodize? And can we challenge and expand our understanding of the present moment by shifting and reframing these historical and spatial categories?

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

A: Until recently contemporaneity was understood in Eurocentric terms. The concept of ‘development’ as applied to what used to be called ‘the periphery’ largely foreclosed the possibility of the contemporary—as concept and as experience—for non-European societies, which were perceived to move through time in the ‘always after’ of modernization and dependency. It used to be very difficult to write about Egypt, for example, as occupying the same space of contemporaneity as France; to make the claim in other words that the modern—whether one is talking about political economic structures or literary genres—is a horizontal temporality rather than a vertical and hierarchical one. I think the synchronous, interconnected global revolts of 2011 changed this essentially colonial episteme for good by demonstrating the political and cultural power of contemporaneity in action.

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: In general, I think collaboration should be the norm rather than the exception in the humanities. Literary history has much to benefit from collective research. One example is the Prismatic Translation project I mentioned earlier, which is run by a collective housed at Oxford University. In my 2019 book I discussed how digitization can enable the kind of collective and even crowd-sourced historical research that could rescue the crumbling archive from the oblivion to which it is surely headed. Nevertheless, the vast majority of literary histories are still single-authored and I have no problem with that either. I owe a great debt to some of these in my own work, of course. I'd also like to mention here that there is a great deal of pleasure to be had from reading what we can and should think of as the *genre* of literary history. Older literary histories can and should be read as literary and historical documents in their own right.

