

# Book Review

***Multilingual Literature as World Literature.* Edited by Jane Hiddleston and Wen-chin Ouyang. Bloomsbury, 2021. ISBN 9781501360091, 314 pp.**

*Multilingual Literature as World Literature* (2021) is a recent addition to Bloomsbury's 'Literatures as World Literature' series engaging with the "elusive concept of 'world literature'" (ii), edited by Thomas O. Beebee. It deviates from the standard format of the series, which is to focus on one country's literature (see, for example, the preceding *German Literature as World Literature* (2014) and *Brazilian Literature as World Literature* (2019)), by taking a look at a much broader category: multilingual literature. With a view to the elimination of the stark borders drawn between languages and nations, the collection engages with the mixing, blending, translation and creation of languages in various forms of literature; chapters in this collection touch on everything from poetry to short fiction and novels. While most of the contributors to the volume are affiliated with UK universities, the United States, Germany, Sweden and France are also represented, and the variety of languages discussed ranges from French, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese and Arabic to Antillean Creole, highlighting the vast diversity and scope of this volume.

The breadth of its subject matter is where the collection both shines and courts risk. Several chapters define 'world literature' and even in some cases 'multilingualism' anew, some in fairly diverging ways; this leads to a plurality of thought that, while perfectly mirroring the plurality the chapters unanimously discuss, defend and analyse, does create an impression of inconsistency in the collection. The introduction explicates that the volume is not concerned with the binarism of local vs national, which is emphasised in many discussions of world literature, but the way multilingual literatures "take neither the nation nor a single language as their starting point" (2). Multilingual literatures thus have an intrinsic resistance to "linguistic, national or communitarian boundaries" and

dramatize “cultural movement and blending” (2). The stated aim of the collection is to “take multilingualism in literature as its own structuring and generative principle” (5), allowing for analysis of linguistic plurality across a range of contexts. Pointing to some of the overarching topics, the book is divided into four parts: Multilingualism and modes of reading; A multilingual ecology of world literature and modes of circulation; Multilingual comparative reading: Beyond translation and untranslatability; and Multilingual poetics of world literature.

The first part focuses on the interactions between different media, featuring a discussion of Édouard Glissant’s late theoretical works in relation to language, literature and the world (Jane Hiddleston), and an analysis of the way Francophone Chinese migrant writers Francois Cheng and Shan Sa negotiate the boundaries of text and image (Shuangyi Li). It also includes a meditation on the interplay of poetry and visual art in the Moroccan *Souffles* generation (Khalid Lyamlahy), and thoughts on the political implications of ‘worldliness’ in the Anglophone Arabic writing of authors Dunya Mikhail, Zeina Hashem Beck, Suheir Hammad and Sinan Antoon (Claire Gallien).

The second part leads the reader through the multilingual ecology of Manuel Rivas (Laura Lonsdale), anxieties about foreign form in literary criticism of the Ottoman novel with the example of Ahmet Midhat Efendi (Keya Anjaria), Rubén Darío’s blending of French style in Spanish works (Carlos F. Grigsby), and Primo Levi’s use of multilingualism as a motif in Holocaust literature (Dominique Jullien).

The third part focuses more on translation, particularly untranslatability, with a discussion of the usage and divergent meaning of the terms *nabka*, *ghetto* and *holocaust* in Elias Khoury’s *Awlād al-Ghītū* (Nora Parr), a close reading of Somaya Ramadan’s transliteration practice (Dima Ayoub), a study on the bilingual yet translation-defying work of Isabel del Río (Ellen Jones), and a meditation on productivity and creativity generated by issues related to translation exemplified by the literature magazine *transition* (Juliette Taylor-Batty).

Finally, part four examines poetry. This includes a focus on the sonic aspects of twentieth-century avant-garde poetry (yasser elhariry), a look at Vahni Capildeo’s translation synaesthesia (Rachael Gilmour), and a study of Creole proverbs in Monchoachi’s work (Christopher Monier). The book closes by contemplating the multilingual history of English and Arabic exemplified by sexuality in the travelogues of Uthmān al-Miknāsī and Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (Wen-chin Ouyang).

The contributors practice what they preach, as all chapters feature extensive passages in languages other than English. However, the impact of the multilingualism of the book is dampened by the practical, pragmatic consideration

of the assumed English-speaking readership; all non-English text (or imagery), whether in the main body of the text or large block quotations, has an English translation. As much as translation is noted in the collection as a distorting and, according to some arguments, de-pluralising force, its presence in the scholarly work itself remains unacknowledged.

Several chapters also engage with the questions of the constituent parts of language and what makes a language; notable examples are Shuangyi Li and Rachel Gilmour's chapters. Li's chapter is focused on the blending of Chinese calligraphy, Chinese text and French text, and shifts not only between the two languages but between the disparate scripts which have given rise to divergent scriptural cultures. Gilmour's analysis of synaesthesia in Vahni Capildeo's poetry focuses on non-linguistic as well as linguistic meaning-making, skilfully evoking the way Capildeo calls attention to "language calling up not only more language, but also sounds, shapes, colours, sensations" (254) and showing the poet's rejection of the "strictures of linguistic comprehensibility" through the contrasting of structurally disparate poetry fragments (254). Meanwhile, Li reveals a playfulness in medium that highlights the visual traits of Chinese and the way Cheng and Sa create art and meaning out of its differences to French, through detailed analysis of whole pages that fuse the Latin and Chinese scripts. For me, these two chapters perfectly highlight the boundary-breaking intention of the collection.

Overall, especially for those interested in the authors discussed in each chapter, this collection is a useful resource. The different approaches taken by the contributors to multilingualism and world literature raise many thought-provoking questions in this growing field. Here, however, the limits of a single volume also come to the fore – it is simply impossible for the collection to look at more than a snapshot of languages and pieces of literature. Thus, the focus on pluralism throughout lends a certain sense of irony, given the self-evident difficulty in achieving it within the current conventions of western Anglocentric academia. It is an irony that the collection exploits; without losing readership or becoming too unconventional to publish within academia, the heterogeneity of languages, diversity of approaches, and refusal to definitively limit what should count as multilingualism all play a part in raising new questions, and go some way towards signposting what a truly *plurilingual* collection might look like in the future. In this, the collection stays true to its stated intention: opening up, rather than setting boundaries.

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## WORKS CITED

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