

Transnational Humanities: Concept and Praxis – Conference Report

Webinar: UCD Humanities Institute PhD Conference

February 19, 2021

In an ever-changing and increasingly transnationalised world, the multidirectional movement of people, commodities, and ideas, enhanced by advances in transportation, information, and communication technologies, become an integral aspect of our everyday lived-experience and identity formation. An analysis of transnational networks in the humanities evinces conversations regarding the increased interconnectivity of social, political, and cultural activities that cut across state boundaries.

In the context of such multidimensional interconnectedness, the 2021 PhD Conference, organised by University College Dublin's Humanities Institute, explored the possibility of "transnational humanities" by investigating transnational concepts and practices. The annual PhD conference was held in the form of a webinar this year in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, thereby creating a more accessible platform for international participants. Following the opening remarks from Prof. Anne Fuchs, director of UCD Humanities Institute, the conference kicked off at 12pm Irish time.

The first panel, chaired by Susan Mihalik, assembled papers on the theme of 'Knowledge, Identity, and Culturality'. Addressing the overlooked potentials of diversity, Diana Ofana (University of Fort Hare) spoke about her research on the practice of social integration through an intercultural philosophical lens. Ofana interrogated mainstream understandings of social integration and argued that the practice should accommodate other philosophies and world views rather than closing perceived gaps through homogeneity. An Afro-communitarian understanding of social integration is built upon this mutual complementarity.

Mengzhen Yue's (University College Dublin) paper examined the influence of political ideologies and literary trends popular in China at this time on the translation of ancient Greek texts into Chinese in the 1950s-1960s. Taking Luo Niansheng's scholarship as an example, Yue highlighted the translator's autonomy while discussing the act of translation as a cross-cultural practice. This paper argued that the translation of ancient Greek texts was closely related to, and influenced by, larger national projects such as the rebuilding of the modern Chinese education system.

Looking at the transnationalisation of the African literary market through the publication of the novel 'Kintu' by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, Clare Kelly (University College Dublin) discussed Makumbi's identity as a "storyteller-author" and her approach to adapting and continuing the tradition of oral storytelling in literature. Kelly's presentation also examined the ontological importance of paratexts and their function within an increasingly globalised literary market.



Dr Ailbhe Kenny (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick), the keynote speaker of the conference, spoke of her research as part of the ongoing HERA-funded project “Night spaces: migration, culture and IntegraTion in Europe” (NITE) in an address entitled “Shaping Space while Stateless: Insights from transcultural interactions,” in which Zhengfeng Wang chaired. Emphasising the active role music plays as an agency for social connection, her paper examined the personal encounters of three African musicians currently living in Cork and Galway, who are often recognised as asylum-seekers, migrants, or refugees. Despite the ups and downs in their lives, they found a sense of belonging and an alternative form of identity by performing art in West Ireland. Simultaneously, their presence altered the local landscape and brought about interaction and collaboration among diverse actors that challenged the conventional notion of citizenship.

The afternoon panel ‘Space, Place and Materiality’, chaired by Suchismita Dattagupta, kicked off with a presentation by Bernadette Fox (University College Dublin). Fox’s presentation titled, “Samuel Beckett’s Transnationalism: The Ebb and Flow of Seascapes simultaneously Local and Global” was embedded in a close reading of Beckett’s seascapes. She stated that while sea is a neglected field of study within Beckett scholarship, his proximity to Dublin Bay, particularly his engagement with the local environment of his childhood and youth years, are constantly identified in his work. Fox interrogated Beckett’s seascapes with a transnational lens, responding globally to his local maritime imagery to contemplate the permeable relationship that exists between culture and environment through a close reading of *Molloy* (1955).

Christopher McCann’s, (National University of Ireland Galway), presentation “Pavarotti’s Sean-nós World Tour: Music, place-time, and transnational cultural exchange in Irish prose literature,” explored how prose authors employed musical devices to manipulate spatial, temporal, and textual boundaries for the interrogation of Ireland’s place in a transnational world. McCann explored Joep Leerssen’s characterization of “Ireland as chronotope” (1996)

to invoke the relationships between space, time, and cultural development. He also analysed the juxtaposition of traditional Connemara, Galway, against the hybrid continental European modernity of Eurovision, Pavarotti and MTV to identify moments where music permits enriching transnational cultural exchange. He likewise examined how musical praxis can deconstruct seemingly rigid hierarchies and dialectics.

The final speaker for the panel, Prolet Decheva (University College Dublin) presented her paper titled, "Lost or Found: The migration of Late Antique and Byzantine objects from museum collections to an 'interconnected' digital space? Some practical challenges." Decheva initiated a discussion on the challenges of researching material outside of the 'canon' of classical archaeology or West European art during a period of restricted access and the impossibility of travel with a pandemic. She also addressed difficulties arising from a lack of standardized systems or catalogues in different international museums touching on problems such as the lack of proper filtering options and inconsistent and insufficient metadata. She therefore argued in her conclusion how implementation of Linked Data and Linked Open Data concepts would facilitate an improvement in researching objects belonging to the same context or culture whilst being dispersed between multiple international institutions.

'Migration, Stateness, Politicality' was the theme of the third panel, which Zexun Zhang chaired. Katharina Fuerholzer (University of Pennsylvania) began proceedings and gave a talk titled "Giving voice to the voiceless: Poetry as a counterpoint to the atrocities of migration". Conscious that migrant voices are commonly at risk of remaining unheard, Fuerholzer analysed *Making Mirrors* (2019), a collection of poetry "by and for refugees." It explored whether literature produces a transnational means of representation, and a way of regaining humanity through art.

From the perspective of political philosophy, Tim Meulemans (University of Antwerp), closely examined the impact of the overruling of an international court in a national adoption case in his talk entitled "Transnational law and the challenge to national sovereignty." Meulemans pointed out that the result of the adoption case created a dichotomy between two different conceptions of democracy: one based on constitutional mechanisms and one based on a system of values. The paper concluded with a suggestion to restore the balance between both principles.

The final speaker, Daniel Dzah (Tulane University) presented "Transnationalism and liberal political philosophy of migration". Dzah criticised the cognitive bias of methodological nationalism because such arbitrary nation-state discourse denies liberal values. He argued that the best way to reject this form of unreason was to incorporate transnationalism and transnationals into theoretical spaces of liberal political philosophy. Furthermore, it strengthens the commitment to the values of moral equality and the justification of coercion to all affected interests.

Each panel concluded with a question-and-answer session, with input from the audience and panels. All the speakers addressed the points that were raised, defended their arguments, and further developed their research topics.

The conference ended with concluding remarks from Prof. Anne Fuchs and the organising committee introduced the TNH-PhD Network. Aiming to build a community among postgraduate students and to provide academic support, it calls for participation from the humanities doctoral researchers working on topics with a transnational dimension.

The conference was convened by Resident Scholars of the UCD Humanities Institute @UCDHumanities / @PhdTnh.

Conference organising committee: Bianca Rita Cataldi, Mike Norris, Kelly Louise Rexzy Agra, and Zhengfeng Wang.

The recording is now on [SoundCloud](#).