

# Teaching World Literature for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Online Resources and Interactive Approaches

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*This paper introduces a pedagogical approach and strategies for using online resources and interactive media to teach in English about writers and writing from around the world without colonizing or excluding other languages and cultures. First, I explain the context and challenges of teaching world literature: the importance of including diverse works and authors; competing definitions and information overload; barriers to international availability and accessibility of non-dominant works and of non-English languages; and students' limited historical and cross-cultural knowledge. I then show how faculty can incorporate open-source Internet and interactive multimedia resources into world literature courses in ways that allow alternative and outsider voices to challenge and expand national, ethnic, linguistic, socio-political, and disciplinary boundaries. Faculty can use web resources such as blogs and wikis; online self-publishing and translation sites; maps, timelines, primary documents, and other sources of historical and socio-political context; and social media platforms to create a more inclusive notion of world literature, as well as a learning process that is dynamic, collaborative, and relevant to students' daily lives.*

## Introduction

In today's globalized, technology-mediated society, a course on contemporary world literature can be especially useful for exploring national, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-political issues, in addition to serving as a model of connected and active student learning. While the concept and study of world literature have a long and varied history that is typically traced to Goethe's 1827 writings on *Weltliteratur* (Damrosch, 2003; Thomsen, 2008), the field has burgeoned in recent years in response to awareness of, and interest in, individual nations' diversity, writers' international and

diasporic identities, and national literary and linguistic groups' unequal representation. Moving beyond the framework of an individual literary corpus attached to one nation and one academic discipline, contemporary world literature raises issues for teachers and students of selecting and critically evaluating texts; of relating contemporary writing to our daily lives; and of situating ourselves in relation to writers and texts from other countries, languages, and cultures. Meanwhile, the Internet provides a platform for alternative and outsider voices to challenge and expand the boundaries created by literary canons, academic discourse, and the traditional publishing industry.



In addition to determining the definition and purpose of contemporary world literature courses, faculty need to identify the range of texts and writers encompassed by the terms, ‘contemporary,’ ‘world,’ and ‘literature.’ The selection and presentation of texts work both to dismantle traditional national, ethnic, linguistic, and academic disciplinary boundaries, and to create new boundaries and divisions. A further issue is the extent to which teaching ‘world literature’ within an English department challenges Anglo-centric and Euro-centric literary models, while also appropriating and/or misrepresenting literature that historically and linguistically has fallen within the province of foreign language departments.

World Literature faculty thus face the double challenge of finding ways to represent current writers from diverse world regions without co-opting or colonizing their texts, and to connect literary works to students’ personal and communal lives, across cultural and national boundaries. To meet these challenges, teachers of literature must develop pedagogical approaches and strategies that address the processes of canonization of global texts and authors through anthologizing practices and textbook selection; the relationship between English and foreign language departments in ‘housing’ foreign-language literature; and the changes wrought by new technologies, media, and the rise of self-publishing on practices of writing, reading, and dissemination of texts, and thus on our understanding of what constitutes literature for twenty-first century classrooms. By incorporating open-source, interactive online resources into the course content and format, faculty can establish a framework for instruction that engages students and connects the subject matter to their daily lives and interests. This approach adds a dynamic dimension to teaching and learning and is relevant to other academic fields in that it creates an active, collaborative learning community over time.

## Challenges of Teaching World Literature Today

World literature instructors must consider several critical issues as they make choices concerning course readings, content, themes, and activities. First, the definitions of ‘contemporary,’ ‘global,’ and ‘literature’ are fraught with conflict and constantly shifting. Second, faculty encounter a variety of barriers in the availability of international

literature, including inadequate publishing, translation, and dissemination of foreign-language texts; lack of scholarly research and reviews of non-English, non-European, and/or non-dominant literary works; and the normalizing and exclusionary tendencies of world literature anthologies and World Literature course reading lists. The third challenge lies in students’ limited historical and cross-cultural knowledge and exposure, which creates an obstacle to reading and understanding texts from different countries and cultural traditions. Finally, the sheer volume of online materials makes it difficult yet necessary for teachers and students to locate, evaluate, and select texts and resources. Moreover, the dismantling of the conventional notion of “the book” through self-publishing media and electronic texts exacerbates the problem of identifying which works to study within such a vast and diverse field. I will provide a brief overview of these challenges, and then focus on some practical approaches and strategies for teaching contemporary world literature via Internet resources, multimedia, and interactive assignments so as to connect the subject matter to students’ lives, and allow students to engage with and contribute to world literature in its current and emerging forms.

## Competing definitions

The problematic nature of teaching contemporary world literature begins with its competing terms: world literature, global literature, international literature, as well as the “deep divide between comparative literature and world literature” (Damrosch & Spivak, 2011, p. 457). Are we referring to an accumulation of national literary traditions, or diasporic linguistic communities? Are we referring to an amalgamation of national literatures, or diasporic linguistic communities? How do we divide and categorize areas of this literary world? For instance, when speaking of ‘the Caribbean,’ do we mean one geographic area, or do we count the Anglophone Caribbean as part of the English-speaking world, the French Antilles as part of the Francophone worlds, and the Hispanophone Caribbean as part of the wider Spanish-speaking world?

Many writers’ lives cross national boundaries: Albert Camus is studied as a French author, despite having been born and raised in Algeria; likewise, Joseph Conrad is known as a great English writer, although he was born in Poland and did not speak English fluently until he was over 20 years old. Contemporary writers often have



even greater “multinational literary heritage” (Damrosch, 2009, p. 9): Maryse Conde is a Guadeloupian writer who spent her youth in France and her adult life in Guinea, Ghana, Senegal, and the United States. Invoking the term ‘world literature’ allows us to situate these cross-cultural writers and their texts within multiple geographic, social, political, and cultural contexts, rather than having to assign them to one or another national category.

However, the term ‘world’ is problematic for world literature classes situated within English Departments, as they usurp foreign language departments and foreign language literatures. Further, which regions/countries/peoples – and which groups within a country or region – do we include? In selecting a set of texts faculty construct a specific literary ‘world’ for students, with specific boundaries, inclusions, and exclusions. Within the available textbooks, only a very few voices come to represent an entire country or continent, as the same set of authors and texts gets circulated through the publishing-review-literary prize-anthology circuit.

Related to the issue of defining world literature is the concept of ‘contemporary.’ Does ‘contemporary’ refer to a synchronous time period, or also to an analogous geographical and cultural context? How do we group and compare literature from different literary traditions and periods? Is it possible for today’s students to place writers from other countries in their social, political, and cultural contexts, particularly writers whose linguistic idiom is not ‘standard’ English, and whose texts might be accessible only in translation? These questions lead to another set of challenges, namely, the limited accessibility of literature-in-translation, as well as students’ limited knowledge of foreign languages, histories, and cultures.

### Inaccessibility of foreign languages, literature, and culture

Moving beyond linguistic boundaries to include literature in translation allows a more accurate view of the world and its literature. However, locating World Literature courses within English departments displaces foreign language departments and creates a world of English and its ‘Others.’ This problem is exacerbated by the fact that English is by far the dominant language of texts translated into other languages (Grossman, 2010; Kovač & Wischenbart, 2010). Edith Grossman (2010b) contends that, “the very concept of world literature as a discipline fit for academic study depends on the

availability of translations”; yet, less than three percent of all books, and one percent of literary fiction and poetry, published in the United States and Britain “each year are translations, compared with almost 35 percent in Latin America and Western Europe” (Grossman, 2010a). Globally, the unequal distribution of translation is even larger: more than half of all translated books translated worldwide derive from English language originals, with only six percent of the world’s books translated into English from all other languages. The three top originating languages, English, German, and French, comprise three out of every four translations worldwide (Kovač & Wischenbart, 2010). A related concern is the rise of university programs and degrees being offered in English worldwide. In China alone, 34 universities offered English-language degree programs as of 2006. At the same time, colleges and universities across the United States are closing or consolidating foreign language departments, and, according to the 2009 MLA report, *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education*, graduate student enrollments are decreasing (p. 9). The domination of English teaching and translated texts poses a serious challenge to Anglophone students’ capacities to understand and engage with cultural positions and perspectives different from their own, and to gain the deep understanding and critical thinking skills that come only through self-awareness and recognition of others, both of which depend on these very capacities.

### Transforming notions of literature through online/self-publishing

A final question concerns what we mean by the term ‘literature’ in the twenty-first century, as we see a reduction in use of printed, published books through the rise of visual and multi-media texts, ebooks, and self-publishing. For today’s literature classroom to mirror what and how students are reading outside the academy, instructors need to include film; graphic novels; online multimedia; and social media such as blogs, wikis, and social networking sites in the study of literary texts. New technology-mediated reading and writing practices are transforming how we write, read, interpret, understand, and relate to ‘literature.’

In addition to opening up the definitions of ‘literature’ and ‘text,’ new reading and publishing formats have changed the timeframe of “contemporary literature.”



Traditionally, the teaching of contemporary literature has been problematic due to the long textbook publication process. Relying on commercial publications meant that classes were working on material that could easily be three or more years old. The wait for literature written in foreign languages – particularly by new authors – to be translated is even longer. Emerging voices are often published in online literary magazines and self-publishing sites long before finding a way into academic anthologies. With the advent of online publishing, the definition of ‘contemporary’ is changing, as literature can be produced in ‘real time,’ responding to current events as they unfold. In order for a course to address current changes in cultural and political life, teachers must include web resources and interactive online forums that are constantly updated.

## New Directions in Global Learning

Instructors can use online resources and multimedia in ways that help address problems of limited access to and understanding of foreign languages and cultures, and include lesser-known international writers and texts. Blogs and wikis; online self-publishing and translation sites; maps, timelines, primary documents, and other sources of historical and socio-political context; and social media platforms can help students attain a more inclusive understanding of contemporary world literature. Moreover, by integrating these resources into the course content as well as classroom activities, instructors promote a learning process that is dynamic, collaborative, and relevant to students’ lives. By contributing to international blogs, collaborative Wikis, and interactive discussion fora, students actively participate in the concrete, quotidian realities and lives of contemporary literature.

Literary websites provide access to new writing in translation, so that students can see a range of authors and texts. Online translation and publishing sites such as *Words Without Borders (WWB)* provide a valuable resource in introducing students to a range of newly emerging authors and texts that may not yet be translated or anthologized in print publications. Another advantage of these sites is that they often offer bilingual versions of texts, so students can get the sound and look of the original version and teachers can point out divergences in the translated rendering of the text.

The following bilingual excerpt from “Isle say blood,” a poem by Mauritian writer Michel Ducasse

(2012), allows students to see how a translation is always an interpretation and an alteration of the original language:

*Isle Say Blood*  
 our marooned history  
 chained by hatred  
 whitewashed memory, creole coolie  
**color anger pain dockers**

*Île va sang dire...*  
 notre histoire marronne  
 de haine enchaînée  
 mémoire blanchie, créole coolie  
**koulèr colère doulèr dockers**

Figure 1

*Isle say blood/île va sang dire... Bilingual Version*

The words that I have bolded in the above figure demonstrate the loss of meaning in the translation from French to English. In the original version, Ducasse inserts Kreol Morisien (Mauritian Creole) into his standard French text, whereas in the English version, the tone is completely changed by the erasure of the rhyming, rhythmic play between two languages in the transmission from, “*koulèr colère doulèr dockers*,” to “color anger pain dockers.” The original version literally incorporates ‘the other,’ as the form embodies the message and metaphor of the poem, whitewashing memory and erasing the Creole language and identity from Francophone Mauritian society, while the English translation only describes it.

Other websites contain primary sources in the form of original documents, maps, and interactive timelines with links to historical and cultural events to give students a broader understanding of the national issues and the time period of a particular author and text. For example, websites such as *Guernica: A Magazine of Art and Politics* allow students to post comments in response to articles and images and thus actively engage with and contribute to the body of views and analyses of texts they read in class. In his article, “Conversation in Context: A Dialogic Approach to Teaching World Literature,” Gary Harrison (2009) notes “the need to recalibrate the concept of world literature from a canon of masterworks to a way of reading that places texts from the world into conversation with one another” (p. 210). The vast realm of open-source news, cultural and political commentary,



and literary websites allows instructors to go beyond this conversation of texts to allow students to enter into an ongoing dialogue with today's culture and events.

A further step is to have students respond to what they read and see in a public online forum, and eventually create their own texts. *The China Beat: Blogging How the East is Read* provides a forum for students to make the transition from readers/spectators to creators of texts and videos, adding their voices to the evolving tapestry of online literary criticism. Another website, *Repeating Islands: News and Commentary on Caribbean Culture, Literature, and the Arts*, was created by two Puerto Rican literature professors for the purpose of connecting and sharing information about the multi-lingual Caribbean community. Students can both read and contribute information, comments, and questions on the site's blog.

Web 2.0 technologies allow students to interact with one another and with the outside world; participate in reviews and discussions of literature; and even author their own documents. Self-publishing programs, blogs, and social media offer ways for individuals to write and access audiences without having to go through the publishing industry and mainstream media and distribution channels. 'Other' voices get heard, both those of new and lesser-known/unknown writers and those of the students themselves, as they post their creative and critical writing on websites, blogs, wikis, or even as finished self-published books. This also allows continuity and community-building from one course, one semester, and one year to the next, as students can benefit from and add to the insights and contributions of the previous year's students.

## Conclusion

Because a course on contemporary world literature raises questions about the meanings of 'contemporary,' 'world,' and 'literature' in our globalized, technology-saturated and -mediated society, and because the Internet has fundamentally changed the mechanisms for creating, distributing, and viewing texts, faculty are called on to include evolving resources and technologies using innovative methods and approaches to the course content and assignments. By incorporating open-source web resources such as online texts, social forums, and multimedia into such a course, instructors can help connect world literature to current affairs and social issues,

and to students' lives in contemporary society. Today, established, well-known authors, new writers starting out, and even the students themselves, have elaborate and accessible online presences, which may include Web sites, blogs, Twitter accounts, and social media pages. These interactive technologies are being used by published authors and amateurs alike to recount, interpret, and respond to global events as they unfold. Ultimately, a contemporary world literature course can increase students' awareness and understanding of global events and of the role that literature and writers play with respect to global issues and relationships. Indeed, students can themselves become active participants in the development of world literature, adding their voices to the continuing conversation within the present and future emerging media environment.

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