

## "World Literature?: American Sentimentalism in a Transcultural Perspective"

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### 1/ World Literature & the Sentimental

Just published this past month, Margaret Atwood's novel *The Testaments* had already been heavily advertised as a sequel to her earlier dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. In her new novel, we somewhat predictably return to the world of Gilead, a repressive misogynist state. One of the protagonists, Aunt Lydia, at the time we meet her a powerful official in Gilead, visits the Hildegard library in Ardua Hall – “one of the few libraries remaining after the enthusiastic book-burnings that have been going on across our land.” In its “inner sanctum” is the “Forbidden World Literature section” with Aunt Lydia's own private selection of books, long prohibited in the (anti-)feminist dystopia of Gilead: “*Jane Eyre*, *Anna Karenina*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Paradise Lost*, *Lives of Girls and Women* – what a moral panic each one of them would cause if set loose among the Supplicants!” Atwood's selection of canonical world literary texts here is certainly not controversial in our own time. Remarkably, all of them have a reception history that connects them to issues of gender and sentiment, something that may extend to Atwood's own work and that, in terms of canon-debates, is perhaps intended as a corrective to the world literature canon as such.

Indeed, we may ask ourselves what exactly sits on the world literature-shelf and why? Certainly, the idea and concept of “world literature” presently carries institutional clout even as it has been controversially discussed within and among its institutional centers. It has informed curricula and the denomination of professorships and programs; hence the label still seems to do cultural (and critical) work for the purposes of “aesthetic education in the era of globalization” (Spivak's title). The term carries cultural capital, no matter how we define it: in political, aesthetic, or economic terms; in an additive or intertextual understanding; as “constellations” (Thomsen); as its own semiotic system of value and taste, or as the “total literature of all peoples and times” and as a “canon of literary works from this total literature that is regarded as timeless and having universal validity” (Metzler in Meyer-Kalkus 97).

In the context of “Global Humanities” (or a “Global Humanities Curriculum”), a project proposed by Homi Bhabha recently, world literature certainly has its place since it raises

awareness for intricate differences and the demands of cultural hermeneutics. In this vein, it involves and invites the lingering in and the “unsettling” of alterity, as it were. Bhabha points to Hannah Arendt and her notion “to think from the standpoint of someone else,” a formulation which recalls George Herbert Mead's “taking the role of the other” as a prerequisite for developing both a sense of self and empathy.

For the present occasion, it appears that working with the concept of world literature can be a fruitful endeavor in dealing with the sentimental as a mode of literary representation. Analyses of sentimentality should be an important topic in a global humanities curriculum too, since aesthetic education is one of its cornerstones. There is a way in which the “homo sentimentalis” (Eva Illouz) and the “homo empathicus” (Alexander Görlach) are produced by literary texts of world literature status. My angle today proposes to revisit the possible meanings and openings of the world literature-paradigm for a discussion of the role of sentimentalism and sentimental writing – or writing that bears sentimental elements, such as Atwood's dystopian novel. Clearly, in some (in fact, most) recent Western genealogical accounts, the very concept of “world literature” has been relying on a rather anti-sentimental aesthetic program, predominantly championing a modernist aesthetics or at least a realist one. Only recently has the world literature canon been somewhat programmatically extended to popular fiction (see, for instance, Nilsson, Damrosch, and D'haen on crime fiction as world literature).

Yet, the sentimental is a great “mobilizer” in more ways than one, in and out of literature, and it engenders a communicative code that is to some extent conventionalized, bearing culture specific features while also providing transcultural patterns. Thus, it allows to account for forms of cultural mobility and cultural transfer across the globe. Seen from a Cultural studies angle, sentimental world literature originates in an interplay of the universal and the particular and addresses questions of difference. The sentimental also engages with alterity and it may effectively melt established otherness (“verflüssigen”) and/or reconfigure it. Unlike Soni, I do not consider an “ethics of alterity” to be at odds with sentimentalism (Soni 319). The core ambiguity here is that the sentimental can have divergent effects, both restorative *and* revolutionary, conservative *and* progressive.

Guiding questions in an approach to world literature focusing on the sentimental are: What is the place of the sentimental in the paradigm of world literature? Which transcultural codes can we identify? Is there a tension between culture specific repertoires of the sentimental in

national literatures vis-à-vis a transcultural repertoire of sentimentalism? Can we develop a transcultural typology the sentimental mode in literature? And how does it relate to the use of the sentimental in other discourses? What forms and functions of the sentimental can we observe with regard to the production of meaning and the (symbolic) order in general? Surely, the sentimental does not constitute one monolithic register as its motifs, props, plots differ just as the representational strategies involved do. At times this may include a self-conscious reflection on their affective economies and investments.

## **2/ *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as World Literature**

The material of my first case study, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, has become a book many people, readers and non-readers, love to hate and it has sparked the dislike of critics and scholars for a whole set of different reasons (students, in fact, mostly find it rewarding and enjoy reading and discussing it). In the present context, it serves as historical backdrop for broader considerations about the sentimental in contemporary literary works. In so many ways, it is a blueprint for a literary tradition that has a specifically North American history but also has ventured abroad and done its cultural work in other countries. It focuses on matters of familial concern/conflict ("self/subject-in-relation," Dobson) and relies on quite a range of representational strategies to evoke empathy, to create compassion, to foster sympathetic identification, and to emotionally appeal to its ostensibly mostly female readership – characteristics that have been subsumed under the arc of sentimental writing. To recall: The sentimental reform novel by Stowe (first published in serial form) came out in 1852, a book that would be widely disseminated across the world, literally, with many, many afterlives. **Translation and thus transcultural outreach** have been one prime indicator of world literary status (Lamping and Tihanov, Apter), and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* certainly has been "translated out of its respective [original] language and made available to the world" (Meyer-Kalkus 103). The novel was translated into more than 20 languages within the first decade after its publication. More than 160 years after its publication, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is available in more than 70 languages (Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford Connecticut). It was first translated into Japanese in 1896, the year of the author's death and garnered much popularity, with delay, in the 1920s, in a translation by the female writer Michiyo Nagayo from 1923. A second criterion for the world literature label would be **transmedial adaptation and commodification**: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exists in plays, shows, films, performances, and

advertisement, and various kinds of material artefacts have been produced as part of the novel's merchandize (in fact, it was one of the first texts in its time and place for which such a wide array of merchandize was produced). Third, the novel has instigated a very rich and manifold **intertextual dynamic** as it has been (partially) appropriated, rewritten, and re-interpreted across the ages. Fourth, as to its sheer **popularity**, by early 1863, the book had already sold one million copies in US and English editions alone. It was not only successful, it was "momentous" (Ammons). *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly* was unprecedented as a publishing and a reading phenomenon. "From the beginning," Hochman tells us, "Stowe's narrative belonged to a category of its own." Fifth, in terms of **constellation**, Stowe's bestseller may be seen as the American textbook example of the genre protest novel that captures the rising emancipatory spirit of the time. [My own work has centered on the German reception of the book and some of you may know that there is a subway stop in Berlin by the name *Onkel Toms Hütte* with quite an interesting history].

In their 2018-publication *Uncle Tom's Cabins: The Transnational History of America's Most Mutable Book*, Tracy C. Davis and Stefka Mihaylova gather essays that show the reach and the impact of the novel in Middle Eastern curricula, on Bulgarian school children during the Soviet Era, on the Iranian stage, in colonial Southeast Asia, in Brazil and Cuba, to name just a few contributions. This publication is following up on similar ones with a narrower scope, such as *Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture* (eds. Denise Kohn, Sarah Meer, and Emily B. Todd for the University of Iowa Press, 2006) and Anna Brickhouse's work on the reception of the text in the Americas at large.

[Let me add that there are several dark aspects in the multi-faceted reception of the book, and I do not mean to suggest that forms of cultural mobility can always be considered liberating or emancipatory interventions. The dynamic of suffering – sacrifice – release – has been applied/called upon in different and for various occasions]

I want to revisit the novel as a prime example in the history of sentimental text production gone global. Thomas Gossett has pointed out in his book-length study on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that the novel, in fact, consists of two plots. The plot closely associated with the titular character follows Tom from the Shelby plantation in Kentucky down South to Louisiana and to his martyr death under lashes of Simon Legree. This is the part of the narrative that has helped cement stereotypes of African Americans in the sense of Toni Morrison's term Africanism, in fact, according to Leslie Fiedler "For better or worse, it was

Stowe who invented African Americans for the whole world” (26). And she did so by introducing a black character who appeared pious, submissive, pacifist, and willing to suffer his fate in slavery. In the context of African American literary and intellectual responses, “Uncle Tom” has become an utterly derogatory epithet and a popular insult, and Donald Bogle in his seminal study considers “Tom” as one of the top five stereotypes of African Americans that have found their way to the film screen.

The second plot is unrelated to the title and it is the plot that follows Eliza and her son Harry on their flight to freedom in the North. Eliza, like Tom a slave on the Shelby plantation, upon overhearing that Shelby is planning to sell her little son (along with Tom), packs up and runs with him. It is the specter of family separation that propels her to escape. And it is her flight that has produced some of the most iconic and impressive scenes from the text (both in the text and its various visualizations): Eliza, bloodhounds on her trail, stepping on floating ice in the Ohio river and crossing it with her son in her arms. When she reaches the northern states, she seeks refuge in a private home. The lady of the house, Mary Bird, happens to be the wife of Senator Bird, Senator of Ohio and hence part of a branch of government that just had passed the “Fugitive Slave Law,” the law that prompted Stowe to write her book as a form of protest as it demanded northerners to return fugitive slaves across the river to the South and rendering it illegal for northerners to help fugitive slaves. At this point in the novel, there is a clear moral conflict (one of many to follow) in which a decision has to be made and this decision is prompted by a gender specific form of empathy and solidarity. Mary Bird proposes an act of civil disobedience in the name of fellow-feeling declaring her home a sanctuary of sorts for Eliza and her son. The Senator complies with her and resolves to drive Harry and Eliza that night to a friend’s house seven miles away. Mrs. Bird recently lost a child of her own and she offers Harry their dead child Henry’s clothes.

In its gender-specific framing, motherhood and the sentiments it engenders is the basis for bonding across the colorline and for containing (racial) alterity. In many 19<sup>th</sup> century US-American literary texts (advocating a separate spheres middle-class ideology) mother love figures as a force that may foster both compliance and subversion. Motherhood and motherly sentiments are generally seen as ennobling the character’s decisions. “Mothers are the best lovers” – reiterates Louisa May Alcott in her sequel to *Little Women*, and these mothers not always comply with patriarchal discourse. Stowe’s authority of experience (stated in a letter she wrote to her friend) relates to her having lost a child shortly after childbirth.

The threat of family separation is the central most important argument in abolitionist (anti-slavery) discourses in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and abolitionist literature reiterates this topic in its use of the sentimental. Such abolitionist sentimentalism can be identified in a whole range of black and white-authored texts of the times. It is also documented by the literary texts, no more than a few samples, that accompany the exhibition “Slavery and Freedom” with its section “The Weeping Time” at the National Museum for African American History in Washington, D.C.

The motif of family separation is a sentimental motif that powerfully conveys political critique, it is not universal since the semantics of family are so diverse across cultures, but it is obviously transculturally intelligible. Despite all the differences in the notions of what constitutes a family and what social functions it serves, there seems to be a common denominator in reactions to family separation in general and mother-child separation in particular that revolves around moral outrage about a violent act which conflicts with a natural sanctity of that fundamental social relation and thus can only be dubbed uncivilized. Albrecht Koschorke has analyzed the history and power of the nuclear family, going back to the “holy family” and tracing its presence and prominence through time and various media.

### **3/ Toward the Global Sentimental Novel? – Sentimentality and Family Separation Novels**

Stowe's 19<sup>th</sup> century political critique and call to civil disobedience was motivated by a religious structure of feeling, that is the notion of Christian charity. Kevin Pelletier has recently referred to the novel as employing an “apocalyptic sentimentalism.” In our contemporary scene, we would most likely rephrase the topic in a decidedly rational register as a human rights issue and refer to Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that guarantees “the right to marry and to found a family” and states that “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.” Literature, on the other hand, still uses the sentimental to tackle social and legal problems and to engage its readers. The topic has been re-visited in similarly important and noteworthy texts and I want to point out how we can conceive of a cluster of texts belonging to a specific constellation across cultures. How does Stowe’s sentimental legacy, or strategy, if you will, appear in novels closer to our own time, in novels that seek to represent human suffering and that navigate cultural difference and alterity? To map a slightly broader spectrum, that is a

hemispheric one, my examples include an African American, a Mexican(-American), and a Canadian writer (this takes us back to Atwood).

African American writer Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) is among many other things, also a rewriting of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in terms of motherly love and care under the conditions of slavery. Or rather: the perversion of that love. Morrison's narrative is asking tough questions: What if Eliza had been caught? What would she have done? Morrison's answer – with a nod to a historical source, Margaret Garner's story – is to say: maybe she would have tried to kill her child to save him from slavery. Morrison's protagonist Sethe claims that she is "trying to put my babies where they would be safe." Morrison indicts slavery as an institution so perverting that it could warp a mother's love into killing her child. In fact, some scholars have argued that *Beloved* was a novel about motherhood rather than slavery and seemed to be indulging in the sentimental. In his review titled "Aunt Medea" – a title punning on the theme of child murder as well as on the most pervasive African American female stereotype (Aunt Jemima), Stanley Crouch critically regards *Beloved* "as a melodrama lashed to the structural conceits of the miniseries." Against such a harsh verdict, one may ask if Morrison rather than simply mimicking a sentimental discourse and getting lost in its pitfalls, is not masterly "ab-using" (in Spivak's sense) Stowe's pretext and thus appropriating the potential of the sentimental for her own purpose, that is trying to come to terms with the collective trauma of slavery?

By taking *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into the present moment, my (companion piece) for the discussion is the (highly acclaimed) novel by Mexican-American author Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children's Archive*, published just this year, 2019. Luiselli has previously recorded her community work as an interpreter for interviews conducted with unaccompanied children in court. *Tell me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017) is the title of a book that is structured around the questions she has asked undocumented children seeking a new life in the US and describes their experience in the land of the American Dream. In her new novel, this material is woven into a road narrative that has a family (an adult couple with two children) drive from New York City to the Southwest. The husband is conducting a sound project among Native American communities, the woman is planning to help a friend find her children who have been arrested at the border and now have disappeared without a trace "within in the system." Their children, a boy and a girl (also unnamed) are along for the ride. Unnamed and unclaimed, so to speak, the children in the car represent the fate of so many

illegal immigrant children that are separated from their mothers/parents. It is, again, the sentimental mode that renders the outrageous injustice and pain inflicted on others graspable for the reader and calls for empathy and solidarity with the victims thus emphasizing the common human ground beneath all ascribed differences. Needless to say, that this text directly refers to the practice of family separation at the Mexican American border and tries to bring the readers into political action. The author is well aware that the options are somewhat limited, but insists on our moral obligation:

“Perhaps the only way to grant any justice,” Luiselli writes in *Tell me How It Ends*, acknowledging that justice may not even be possible, “is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always, to haunt and shame us. Because being aware of what is happening in our era and choosing to do nothing about it has become unacceptable. Because we cannot allow ourselves to go on normalizing horror and violence. Because we can all be held accountable if something happens under our noses and we don’t dare even look” (30).

Luiselli connects exposure to agency and action, like Stowe before her. Her novel, nevertheless, is a highly aestheticized response; at times echoing Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, it reflects on representational politics and on the iconography of suffering. As a document of its time, it can be placed next to the world press photo of the year 2019: the photograph of a girl crying for his mother (“Crying Girl at the Border”) by John Moore.

#### **4/ Conclusion**

Let me conclude: My paper began by problematizing the concept of world literature with regard to the sentimental and sentimental literature, staying within the realm of North America. The analysis of sentimentality in world literature has to take into account the culture-specific and the transcultural dimensions and it looks at the ways in which the sentimental represents alterity. “However, as numerous scholars have noted,” Rebecca Wanzo writes, “the desire for identification demonstrates how a sentimental reading practice can be an ethical response that recognizes the interconnectedness of oppressions and the efficacy of empathy. The drawback of such a reading practice – and not a small one – is the way in which it functions as a compensation for the difficulty of actually effecting sustained political change.



What purveyors of the sentimental know is that they can sell the possibility of being able to change one's view of the world, as the world itself often seems too difficult to tackle." (111) Stowe tackles this conundrum explicitly in the afterword to her novel when she asks her readers to "feel right." Everything else follows from this. Novels of family separation – from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Toni Morrison to Valeria Luiselli to Margaret Atwood (others could be named) – reveal the gravitational pull on writers and readers alike that the sentimental continues to have. They can be considered part of a world literary cluster of texts that at the same time inculcates, curates, and dissects affective response to literary texts.

In closing, I want to return to Margaret Atwood's text with which I began. Atwood's novel, I want to suggest, acknowledges its debt to its historical precursors and it echoes the semantics of slavery and abolitionism in no uncertain ways: the fugitive women in Gilead use the "underground femaleroad" ("underground railroad" is the expression used by 19<sup>th</sup> century fugitive slaves) to escape. One of the main plots of the novel is concerned with a family reunion. Is Morrison correct when she contends that American slavery has been "playground of the imagination" all along? From a different angle, somewhat contrary to Morrison, Roland Barthes, looking at a photo of his mother, registers the "sentimental wound of maternal separation" (Barthes) that in one way or another may affect us all.

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