



Yale 2017 PIER Summer Institute: Africa and the World

Transnational Literature and “Conjunctive Consciousness”: *The Translator* by Leila Aboulela

Literature Unit for “Introduction to Literature” Course (community college; a course focused on literary genre and devices as well as critical analysis, and a prerequisite to upper-level literature courses)

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Unit Objectives

1. Introduce students to the concepts of transnational literature, third space, and “conjunctive consciousness” (Loka Losambe).
2. Apply “conjunctive consciousness” as a lens to *The Translator* by Leila Aboulela.
3. Introduce students to “conversion” and “translation” as secondary lenses (linked to the primary lens) to Aboulela’s text.
4. Find thematic connections between *The Translator* and other course texts (themes of identity via place, language, and faith).
5. Identify literary devices in an extended text (novel). Interpret the connection of meaning and literary choices (especially narrative chronology and point-of-view).
6. Practice close reading of passages from an extended text.
7. Distinguish when to quote, paraphrase, or summarize material for inclusion in literary analysis.

Text : Aboulela, Leila, *The Translator*. Black Cat, 1999.

Class Plan

Day 1

In Class:

Introduce students to the concepts of transnational literature, third space, and “conjunctive consciousness” through short lecture and class reflection on one or more of these three transnational artists:

Nigerian-British Poet / Playwright / Performer Inua Ellams

Watch short promo for *An Evening with an Immigrant* which maps out geography of his biography and illustrates the transnational: <https://vimeo.com/173997129> or <https://stratford-circus.com/event/an-evening-with-an-immigrant/#data-sc-tabs-alt-index%3D%22%22=overview>

“Thirteen Negro Fairy Tales” (audio of Ellams reading poem here <http://indiemusicfinds.com/2009/05/30/thirteen-fairy-negro-tales/>)

Class discussion of geographical / cultural / linguistic conjunctions
or

Untitled

“To name something is to call it into life, to determine its future. If we let our children name themselves, will they author their own destinies? Will the nameless ones be free? *Untitled* is a magical realist story set in Nigeria and England, of identical twin boys separated at infancy.” (<https://www.oberonbooks.com/untitled.html>)

(Brief passage TBD and see trailer at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xKQFIhS7gg>)

Class discussion of geographical / cultural / linguistic conjunctions

Sudanese –British Painter Ibrahim el-Salahi

Provide brief overview of biography: “Ibrahim El-Salahi is a Sudanese artist who was born in 1930 in Omdurman, Sudan. He currently lives and works in Oxford, England. He combines painting and drawing often using motifs from African, Arab and Islamic art as well as Western references.” (<http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/who-is-ibrahim-el-salahi>)

Project image without indicating title (Trees 2003)

Students describe painting and respond. Discuss and point to value of geographical / cultural / aesthetic conjunctions (influences of English landscape, Sudanese/ Muslim past, Muslim and Western art [Piet Mondrian])

See image and analysis at <https://theculturetrip.com/africa/sudan/articles/ibrahim-el-salahi-painting-in-pursuit-of-a-cultural-identity/>

Sudanese American Poet Safia Elhillo

Provide brief biography; read brief excerpt from the foreword by Kwame Dawes to her first poetry collection *The January Children* : “she is negotiating cultures, geographies, and languages, and these negotiations define her relationship to the idea of exile and the idea of home.” See introduction at <http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/nebraska/9780803295988/>).

“asmarani does psychogeography” (<http://www.puertodelsol.org/2015/07/black-voices-safia-elhillo/>)

or

“to make use of water” (<https://unpblog.com/2017/01/01/excerpt-the-january-children/>)

Discuss and point to value of geographical / cultural / linguistic conjunctions

Instructor Options

The instructor might select several options through which to explore the critical concepts, or the instructor might review one option with the class and then have students individually or in groups work on another option. Additionally, one of the poems by Safia Elhillo could be used for a short at-home writing assignment. An internet search would reveal many additional authors and artists for this activity. Students might do searches on their own and find additional examples as a homework assignment.

Note that hard copies of the Inua Ellams and Safia Elhillo texts should be distributed if used in this lesson.

Instructor Resources

Transnationalism

In *Nations unbound* Glick Schiller Basch and Szanton Blanc “define ‘transnationalism’ as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. [They] call these processes transnationalism to emphasise that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships – familial, economic, social, organisational, religious and political – that span borders we call ‘transmigrants’. An essential element of transnationalism is the multiplicity of involvements that transmigrants sustain in both home and host societies.”

Quoted in:

“Transnationalism: a review and annotated bibliography” Gayle Munro

<https://stateofnationalism.eu/articles/transnationalism-a-review-and-annotated-bibliography/>

See also Adriana Dagnino, "Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s)." In *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 2013, Vol. 15, No. 5,

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2339&context=clcweb>

Third Space Theory / Cultural Hybridity

Cultural hybridity or third space theory is grounded in the work of Homi K. Bhabha, who writes “that the theoretical recognition of the split-space . . . may open the way to conceptualising an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*. . . . it is the inter- . . . the *in-between* space . . . that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. . . . And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.”

An Introduction to Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture - A Macat Literature Analysis* (Short, basic summary; view to 1.53)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mnh9mv8SGU

Homi K. Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, Routledge, New York 2006, p. 155–157. *Atlas of*

Transformation, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/c/cultural-diversity/cultural-diversity-and-cultural-differences-homi-k-bhabha.html>.

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Complete text at

https://archive.org/stream/TheLocationOfCultureBHABHA/the%20location%20of%20culture%20BHABHA_djvu.txt

Conjunctive Consciousness

Lokangaka Losambe, in his presentation at the 2017 African Literature Association and the PIER Institute “Post-hybrid Conjunctive Consciousness in the Literature of the New African Diaspora,” following on third form theory, distinguished an earlier generation of African writers who wrote out of their place and a post-hybrid generation who write out of several places, achieving what Losambe labelled a “conjunctive consciousness.”

Day 3

Practice close reading of an extended text, *The Translator* by Leila Aboulela.

1. Class reads chapter 1 (read aloud by individual students).
2. Students discuss opening dream and sense of geographical disorientation.
3. Class constructs an outline of the chapter’s shifts (of location and thought).
4. Instructor discuss narrative chronology and point-of-view.

Homework:

Read and outline chapters 2-8 modeled on classwork.

Day 4

1. Students meet in groups and share outlines of chapters 2-8. Each group is responsible for constructing an overview of one of the identified geographies: Scotland (the apartment and the university); Sudan (memories of past); dreamscape; prayer-scape
2. Each group presents overview
3. Class discusses “conjunctive consciousness” theme.
4. Close reading of pp. 41-42 (concluding pages of chapter 4), looking at issues of “translation” and “conversion” as they inform theme of “conjunctive consciousness.”
5. Review of integrating passages into literary analysis; selecting passages; determining whether to quote, summarize, paraphrase.

Instructor Resource

“Back Home: Translation, Conversion and Domestication in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*,” Tamar Steinitz; Interventions: *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* Vol. 15, 2013 - Issue 3: Translation and the Postcolonial, pp. 365-382.

Homework:

Assignment: Read chapters 9-14.

Short writing: Select a passage from chapters 9-12 and do a close reading. Consider how issues of “translation” or “conversion” inform the text thematically. Approximately 500 words. Email instructor with passage chosen (page number[s] and opening sentence of passage).

Day 4:

Instructor has reviewed the selected passages –emailed to him--and selected three or four for classroom discussion.

1. Students read their close readings (projected on document camera) and class discusses how translation and conversion thematically and narratively unify the text. Consider western Christian and Muslim sensibilities.

Homework:

Assignment: Read and outline chapters 15-end to continue examination of “conjunctive consciousness.”

Day 5:

1. Students discuss differences between her Scottish and Sudanese world.
2. Class returns to lens of “conjunctive consciousness.”
3. Class discusses “point of view” and closing lapses into first person.
4. Connecting ideas to earlier texts: Instructor points to Abouela’s effort to write a “Muslin *Jane Eyre*” reflecting themes of “faith” and “conversion.” (See <http://www.leila-aboulela.com/books/the-translator/inspiration/>). Class reviews passages from Abu Nuwas and Tayeb Salih which open Parts One and Two.
5. Journal writing: What connections do you see between this text and other class texts in the ways identity is shaped by place, language, and/ or faith?

Assessment:

Exam: Final exam (for semester) will include definitions and close reading of one of several passages, pointing to issues discussed in class.

Long Essay: *The Translator* will be an option for inclusion in an essay in which students select three or more texts to explore an issue of identity linked to place, language, or faith.