

How do contemporary writers represent the politics of touch?

The Politics of Touch

- Politics of relation: how do – and should – we relate to and represent the suffering of global, cultural and historical others?
- Questions of scale: the relationship between metaphor and materiality, between a map and the world represented. What is the relation between recent philosophical accounts which metaphorically invoke terms such as ‘touch’ and ‘vulnerability’ to describe human subjectivity, and the varied specificities of lived experiences of contact? In what ways are these accounts gendered?
- Focus on contemporary creative writing: in what ways can and does contemporary literature address these questions, not only through what it says but also through what it does?

Theoretical Frame

- Critics bringing together postcolonial theory and trauma studies have often raised questions such as: what is absent from, or concealed within, the hegemonic narratives through which we structure our national, cultural and personal identities? What are the ghosts that haunt the stories we tell about ourselves? Who or what is framed as other, as beyond the frame of culture, the nation, perhaps even beyond the human, beyond intelligibility?
- In these contexts, the creation of normative maps – the organisation of geographical, social and semantic space – has often been read as a colonial process of abstraction. This sometimes concurrently locates resistance in the (plural) realities masked beneath; in the oppositional process of revealing the map’s artifice.
- I argue that this frame-based mode of resistance risks reinstating a gendered opposition between surface and depth (Sedgwick, 2003), between the symbolic and the real. In contrast, affect theory offers an alternative reading of the normative as sedimentation (Ahmed,), a kind of moving map.
- I explore how recent examples of contemporary world literature might ‘resist’ through their engagements with the politics of touch and, concurrently, through renegotiating the relation between the material and the discursive. This involves discussing how they might ‘resist’ through reconceptualising the notion of resistance in literature.

Examples: World Literatures of Memory

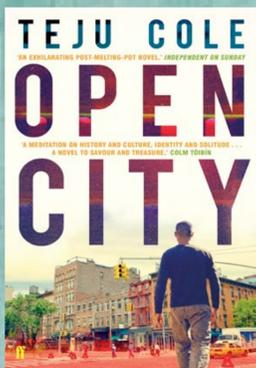
Why ‘world literature’? How do texts’ engagements with the politics of touch reflect on this as a category and critical map, and concurrently, on the dangers and possibilities of comparison?

Texts as ‘world literature’?

- Thematic concerns: all published in the past 10 years, the texts all display a ‘world-shaped’ (Walkowitz) thematic concern with negotiating their relation to the pain of global and past others, as well as with how writing from a minoritarian position might interrogate hegemonic, national forms of memorialisation.
- Circulation and reception: all ‘promoted by international publishers for a world market-place’. (Young).

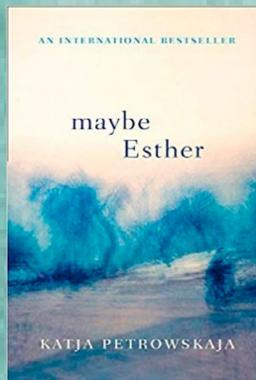
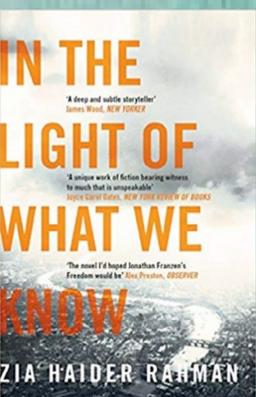
Texts as critiquing normative readings of worldliness in literature and its relation to ‘resistance’

- All produce a metacommentary on the politics of their role and value as world literature in the contemporary moment. They problematise the relationship between the definition of ‘worldliness’ and hegemonic understandings of resistance.
- Several explore modes of literary-political commentary that may extend beyond a worldly variation on (post)modern self-reflexivity: not committed to revealing the skeletons in the nation’s closet – making the invisible visible – but re-membering the materiality of the metaphor, the corporeality of the frame.



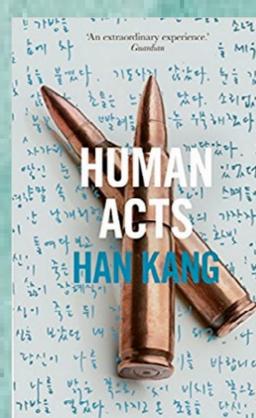
Blind Spots: Teju Cole, *Open City*, 2011; Zia Haider Rahman, *In the Light of What We Know*, 2014

- *Open City*: Nigerian-American narrator as modern-day flaneur wandering through New York, uncovering its buried traumas.
- *In The Light of What We Know*: engagement with post-9/11 global politics. First-person narrator relates the life of his friend.
- Both texts perform a superficially empathic, cosmopolitan engagement with past and present suffering to reveal the material ‘blind spots’ of cosmopolitan readings of the politics of relation.
- However, they reveal that even this critique relies on a gendered opposition between material reality and the artifice of cosmopolitanism. It enacts its own violence.
- Highlight the risk of fetishizing the tactile and corporeal as a cipher for either material alterity or the ‘untranslatable’.
- Yet do not open up alternative trajectories for imagining resistances beyond this oppositional paradigm. This positions their own self-reflexive mode of writing as the only mode of literary resistance in an all-consuming late-capitalist present.



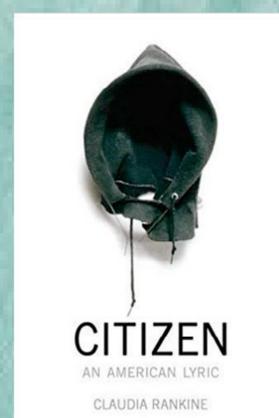
Touching Pasts; Subjunctive remembering: Katja Petrowskaja, *Maybe Esther*, trans. 2018 (Vielleicht Esther, 2014)

- Follows the autobiographical narrator’s process of researching her family history across several generations and European countries.
- Concerned with the materiality of social and linguistic structures, as well as the contingency and movement of the material histories of ‘what happened’.
- Posits and performs memory as a tactile act of translation – or an act of tactile translation: an intimate, embodied process of physically and emotionally relating to – touching – past others, in a way that both disrupts and extends beyond the boundaries of present subjectivity to open space for connection to past and present others, while also moving – translating – and mediating the past through this very process.



Bodies; Contingent Resistances: Han Kang, *Human Acts*, 2016

- First published in South Korea in 2014, translated into English in 2016.
- Multivocal narration of the Gwangju Uprising and its traumatic aftermath.



Skin; Haptic Histories: Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, 2014

- Collage-like blend of poetry, commentary, photography.
- The pain of racism; the traumatic history of race in America.

Comparative reading as friction

- Bringing together texts to read them for the multiple ways into thinking about touch, resistance and world literature that they produce when read in combination.
- Working outwards, closely examining the texts as points of encounter which might, in themselves and in relation to each other, generate new or unexpected directions or modes of thinking through the present.