

Crises of the Universal in Anglophone Literatures and Criticism (19th-21st centuries)

In the 20th century, the universalist paradigm was put in crisis by thinkers of the black radical tradition such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, then by African-American feminists who were marginalized both from the women's movement because of their skin color, and from the civil rights movement because of their gender. The epistemological crisis wrought by postcolonial studies beginning in the 1970s, and currently by decolonial studies, testifies to a deep disenchantment with the category of universality, sometimes understood as an unkept promise of equality that is actually quick to break into violence. According to Antoine Lilti, the critique of the "tension between universalism and Eurocentrism" concerns three points: the complicity of certain works of the Enlightenment with colonial ideology, the confiscation of universalism by Western thinkers who reduce other voices to silence, and finally, the pretensions to universality of a discourse that is in fact geographically and historically circumscribed. In their reassessment of the blind spots of universalism inherited from the Enlightenment, critics such as Edward Said, Dipesh Chakrabarty or Gayatri Spivak have brought to light the Eurocentrism of universalist thought, revealing murky connections between the Enlightenment's claim to universality, the colonial enterprise and the racialized discourse that underlies it.

This conference seeks to both acknowledge this major theoretical decentering while also exploring a plurality of other critiques of the universal, including those that may be situated prior to or even in the margins of postcolonial critique. The crisis of the universal involves and incites other crises: that of the modern subject, of humanism, of progress. It shakes up an entire host of traditions that Western cultures have largely taken for granted until the end of the 20th century, revealing the forms of domination and exclusion that a universal truth is liable to impose on minority identities. Although once the banner of modernity's champions, the universal is no longer the prerogative of the moderns. Do these critical crises render the very concept of universalism inoperative, or do they invite us to reconsider it according to new methods? While the notion of a universalist ideal now appears suspect, are there other forms or possibilities for its reconfiguration on the horizon?

This conference proposes to suspend binary schema, particularly by bringing universalism into dialogue with a variety of concepts, such as singularity, plurality, heterogeneity, individuality, and the local. The question is how anglophone literatures and criticism in particular "single out" (Etienne Balibar), "complicate" (Barbara Cassin), "pluralize" (Mireille Delmas-Marty), or "decolonize" (Julien Suaudeau and Mame-Fatou Niang) the universal. We will therefore consider the crisis of the universal not as an unequivocal rejection of it, but as the possibility of "questioning it" (Jean-Claude Milner) and of evaluating its power in more ways than as a homogenizing and silencing force. We can anticipate the following lines of thought, without of course excluding others not presented here:

- **Literary writing and universalism.** What are the forms and tropes through which literature imagines the universal, even if only to resist it by the same token? We will be interested, by way of example, in the problematic articulation of the particular and the universal in allegorical writing, in the universality of myth and its criticism in contemporary rewritings, in the motif of the universal library, or the possibility for utopian literature to offer a universalist horizon. What role does translation play in intercultural transfers, literary hybridity or the development of a literature that is conceived in dialogue with the universal? Can the notion of "literary universals" (P. C. Hogan) help us apprehend literature through the prism of the universal? What critique of universalism is offered to us by poetry, as a form of writing that, for thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe or Fred Moten, radicalizes singularity, notably by putting sound and sense in an inextricable relation, such that the latter can neither be extracted from its particular language to constitute a general meaning, nor be translated without loss?
- **The history of criticism and universalism.** This axis of reflection will consist in questioning the history of different currents of literary critical theory in the 20th century and their ambivalent relationship to universalism. Does formalism, as it emerges in

New Criticism and reappears in neo-formalist aesthetics, make it possible to develop an anti-universalist posture? Does structuralism necessarily aspire to a discourse with universal scope? How have gender studies, postcolonial studies, or deconstruction in the English-speaking world made it possible to critique the principle of universality? What place does Marxist historicism, in Frederic Jameson's vein, for example, grant to the singularity of the literary text?

- **The universal's interrogation by contemporary theoretical perspectives.** How does postcolonial and decolonial criticism make it possible to put the concept of universalism in crisis and to open up a field of study that does not aim for the universal, but brings out a "pluriversal" approach (Arturo Escobar) to cultures and literatures? How might these perspectives be put in a fruitful debate with what Julien Suaudeau and Mame-Fatou Niang call a "postcolonial universalism"? To what extent do global studies and ecocriticism offer a renewed approach to the universal and to a universal subject, by disturbing the contours and specific temporalities of the national? How do they bring to light the particular positions from which Eurocentric universalism is expressed? To what extent does the cognitive and "biocultural" (Nancy Easterlin) approach to literature bring to the fore the existence of cognitive invariants or of a global cognitive evolution? What place might Kantian idealism have in the contemporary critical landscape? Do environmental studies and New Materialism offer the possibility of rethinking the universal according to an approach freed from anthropocentric frameworks?
- **(Re)evaluating the universal.** In their essay *Universalisme*, Julien Suaudeau and Mame-Fatou Niang conceive of a "universalism that is commensurate with the world". While contemporary Anglophone literature (and postcolonial literature in particular) resists the homogenizing power of universalism, doesn't the Anglophone literary imagination of the 19th century already reveal the paradoxes and gray areas of a discourse inherited from the Enlightenment that celebrates the universal principles of progress or reason? How do English-language literatures think of the universal in terms of the local and the particular, and thus make it foreign to itself? Isn't the universal, as literature envisages or imagines it, paradoxically marked by an unfinished quality or a form of incompleteness?

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Please send your proposals (200-300 words), in French or in English, as well as a short bio-bibliography to the following address: crises.universel@gmail.com

Publication: this conference will be followed by a peer-reviewed publication.

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