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Multilingualism and Periodical Studies: A Report from an RSVP + ESPRit Workshop

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This fieldnotes section of *JEPS* shares discussions from a Spring 2022 online workshop on ‘Multilingualism and Periodical Studies’. Jointly hosted by the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals (RSVP) and the European Society for Periodical Research (ESPRit), the workshop brought together scholars and researchers from diverse geographical and linguistic arenas, concentrating on periodicals from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but often beyond the ‘Victorian’ and ‘European’ purviews of the sponsoring groups. It sought to spotlight ongoing projects in academic research across languages as well as to raise questions about the challenges and possibilities of multilingual scholarship in practice. What follows are a set of short research papers as well as a roundtable opening statements on the question ‘how do you define multilingualism’ and its relation to periodical studies.

As readers of this journal are well aware, periodicals offer a unique set of materials for a multilingual approach. Because of their generic hybridity and varying circulations, periodicals have always invited interdisciplinary methods, which our workshop participants expanded into the study of periodicals’ linguistic complexity. Periodicals define far more intricate political imaginaries and publics than just the nation. Their linguistic richness and language circulation work within as well as across political formations at various scales. And the geographic and generic reach of periodicals calls for scholars to research them with just as capacious an approach. As Jane Chapman argues, ‘scholars of nineteenth-century periodicals should attempt to escape the confines both of national markets and monolingualism’.¹ Yet the compelling rationale for multilingualism has not always shifted the landscape of periodicals scholarship. If it ‘urgently needs to become multilingual’, as Jessie Reeder claims of nineteenth-century transatlantic studies, it can seem ‘plagued by the pervasive tendency to *conceptualize* the subject inclusively while *producing* it narrowly’.² As our panelists reflected, the obstacles are significant, including institutional histories, imperial legacies, the infrastructure of scholarly resources, and the politics of translation.

Two seismic changes in nineteenth-century scholarship would seem to have urged multilingualism forward: intensifying calls for ‘widening the nineteenth century’, and the digitization of and online access to research materials. Within the field in which we both work, Victorian studies, scholars have broadened its conceptual geography with

1 Jane Chapman ‘Transnational Connections’, in *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers*, ed. by Alexis Easley, Andrew King, and John Morton (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 175–84 (p. 184).

2 Jessie Reeder, ‘Toward a Multilingual Victorian Transatlanticism’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.1 (2021), 171–95 (p. 175).

frameworks including the imperial, diasporic, postcolonial, Anglophone, transatlantic, transnational, and transimperial.³ Instead of just shifting these frameworks, other scholars have called for ‘undisciplining’ the field itself, and dismantling the historical structures of racism and exclusion that continue to shape how nineteenth-century studies is practised.⁴ To these, we would add the hegemony of the English language, itself an imperial legacy that, in various ways, extends into the present the very historical asymmetries that contemporary scholarship would seek to redress. Sukanya Banerjee explains how any such approach

requires us to read different archives, differently located authors, and texts written in different languages [...] we need to expand the linguistic boundaries of what we include under the purview of Victorian study. Indeed, using a monolingual lens — as we mostly do, at least in North America and the UK — to study what was a remarkably polyglot empire seems woefully inadequate.⁵

Both ESPRit and *JEPS* have as founding principles the promotion of scholarship focused on the linguistically diverse European press. As ESPRit’s annual conference and issues of this journal demonstrate, monolingual approaches are a rare exception rather than the norm. Given the dominance of English in the international fora through which we communicate our research, scholars of the European press routinely work in at least two languages, exemplifying the working reality of multilingual approaches. The depth, range, and richness that multilingual comparative periodical studies brings surfaces more overtly as a methodological principle in work that attends to how different materialities and modalities of the press communicate across and between languages, diachronically or synchronically. Mastheads; the space of the page; layouts of columns; ‘genres’ such as the little magazine, the letters page, or book review; and the visual coding of images, for instance, communicate at linguistic, translinguistic, and inter-linguistic levels.⁶

Like *JEPS* and ESPRit, our workshop and this fieldnotes section continue the practice of conducting academic business in English while striving to look beyond its political exclusions. How we wrestle with that problem constituted a good deal of our panelists’ discussion. Our goals were not only to acknowledge these issues, but to provide a diverse forum where scholars could learn from each other on existing and future work. This might include further interrogations of the destructive repercussions of European colonization for indigenous media across the globe. Ongoing work in the field that draws attention to different multilingual approaches on international and

3 For a good explanation of the opportunities as well as critical challenges of these approaches, see Sukanya Banerjee, Ryan Fong, and Helena Michie, ‘Introduction: Widening the Nineteenth Century’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.1 (2021), 1–26.

4 Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, ‘Introduction: Undisciplining Victorian Studies’, *Victorian Studies*, 62.3 (2020), 369–91.

5 Sukanya Banerjee, ‘Postcolonial’, in *The Routledge Companion to Victorian Literature*, ed. by Talia Schafer and Denis Denisoff (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 462–72 (p. 469).

6 See for example Evanghelia Stead’s rich comparative scholarship, including most recently *Sisyphé beureux: Les revues artistiques et littéraire. Approches et figures* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2020); Andreas Beck, Nicola Kaminski, Volker Mergenthaler, and Jens Ruchatz, eds, *Visuelles Design: Die Journalseite als gestaltete Fläche / Visual Design: The Periodical Page as a Designed Surface* (Hanover: Wehrhahn, 2019), which includes 18 essays in English, French, and German that focus on developments in graphic culture from the early 19th century centred on haptic encounters with the page; Thomas Smits, *The European Illustrated Press and the Emergence of a Transnational Visual Culture of the News, 1842–1870* (London: Routledge, 2020); or collaborative European projects and networks such as ‘Children in Comics: An intercultural history (1865–)’ that is drawing together histories of the representation of the child in comics from Belgium, France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy and Spain, and the Mainz-based [Transnational Periodical Cultures](#) research group that looks at periodicals as modes of transfer and translation across national boundaries and languages.

transimperial scales include periodical scholarship on the ‘foreign language press’, that is, newspapers and periodicals published in languages other than the dominant language of the country in which they appear (see Prain Brice in the following section) and on indigenous media history.⁷

Indigenous language media and the foreign language press have been sidelined historically in archival projects that have prioritized the preservation of national collections. The widespread digitization of historical periodicals undoubtedly presents scholars with new opportunities and but also roadblocks to multilingual studies. As Lara Putnam suggests, digitization has helped steer a transnational turn in historical scholarship: ‘Digital search has become the unacknowledged handmaiden of transnational history.’ Yet digitization also comes with ‘systematic blind spots’, including what has been digitized or not.⁸ These blind spots emerge, in part, from the institutional histories of those collections, often as part of national initiatives connected to libraries, museums, and cultural heritage institutions, frequently delimited by languages.⁹ They may perpetuate the exclusions and hierarchies of what cultural elites deem worth the investment, or who has the resources to undertake and host digital collections. Even given digital collections in multiple languages, there are massive technical obstacles to searching across collections or automating translated search. The digital cannot become the handmaiden of multilingual scholarship without also understanding its significant limitations. As our workshop presenters agreed, the major challenges of multilingualism are intellectual, institutional, and cultural.

In the section to follow, we present the workshop’s brief research papers and statements from its subsequent roundtable which, from various disciplines and geographic perspectives, sketch multilingualism’s complex field. The research papers by Lucia Campanella, Jana Keck, Sara Hernández Angulo, Lindsay Wilhelm, and Eloïse Forestier each offer specific case studies while also developing some themes in common. They track the movements of texts across places and examine how translation and multilingualism might establish transnational networks or consolidate communities (Campanella, Forestier, Keck, Wilhelm). At the same time, all our presenters demonstrated how multilingualism informs a distinctly local politics, unique to where we find it. Even finding such materials can be a considerable challenge, given limits of reading, cataloguing, and searching these materials (Forestier, Keck); the extent of their digitization (Angulo); and the very politics of access (Wilhelm). Scholars trying to work across historical language divides must reckon with how the hierarchies of nineteenth-century language politics are still active in the present (Forestier, Angulo, Wilhelm). In widening the nineteenth century, we must take care not to replay its imperial presumptions.

7 On the foreign language press, see the [TransfoPress](#) network. For work at the intersection of indigenous print media and multilingualism, see for instance ongoing debates about multilingualism, colonizing languages, and the indigenous press in Africa in the long-running *African Journalism Studies*; chapter 2 of Nikki Hessel’s *Sensitive Negotiations: Indigenous Diplomacy and British Romantic Poetry* (New York: SUNY Press, 2021) on the multilingual early nineteenth-century newspaper the *Cherokee Phoenix* and chapter 5 on multilingualism in the Maori-language monthly, *Tē Toa Takinti* in the early twentieth century; Noenoe K. Silva, *The Power of the Steel-Tipped Pen: Reconstructing Native Hawaiian Intellectual History* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2017) that includes chapters on the commitment to indigenous language preservation via print media by newspaper publisher and writer, Joseph Mokuōhai Poepoe.

8 Lara Putnam, ‘The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast’, *American Historical Review*, 121.2 (2016): 377–402 (pp.377, 379).

9 Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, *The Politics of Mass Digitization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018). The federated newspaper collection [Europeana](#) suggests a promising way forward, but is itself vulnerable to organizational restructuring and the participation of national libraries.

Participants in the following roundtable discussion refined and expanded on these ideas. Asked “How do you define multilingualism?” Sukeshi Kamra, Klaudia Hiu Yen Lee, Marianne Van Remoortel, Michelle Prain-Brice, Aled Gruffydd Jones, and Meghan Forbes each presented opening statements which collectively outline three major approaches. First, multilingualism appears as an object of study, including multilingual texts as well as the contexts in which multilingualism was practised. Presenters shared examples of each that illustrated the exchanges, hierarchies, adaptations, subversions, and exclusions of languages in sociocultural context. Second, multilingualism is a contemporary research practice with unique challenges in terms of expertise, collaboration, distance from language history, access, and more. Third, multilingualism also operates within the material, visual, and bibliographic conditions in which texts are published. Multimodality communicates alongside language-as-text, too. Taken together, these statements do not present settled agreement on what multilingualism means, how it appears historically, or how it shapes contemporary practice. Instead, they outline possibilities for a dynamic research agenda for periodicals scholars, working independently or in collaboration, as we hope this workshop exemplified.

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