

International conference: (Re)Creating A Global Literary Canon

Organised by Peggy Levitt and Wiebke Sievers

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Call For Papers

The world is in the throes of a terrible refugee crisis. According to the UNHCR (2016), in 2015 there were more than 65 million refugees and internally displaced people around the globe. That is approximately one in every 113 people. And forced migration is not the only type of movement on the rise. The 2015 *World Migration Report* stated that in addition to the 232 million international migrants, there are an estimated 740 million internal migrants worldwide (IOM 2015). That means that nearly one billion people (or roughly one out of every seven people in the world today) move internally or internationally, by force or by choice. More and more, they move between countries in the global south rather than from south to north. They move in a world of economic crisis, neoliberal restructuring, precarious jobs, major cutbacks in social welfare, and heightened nationalism and xenophobia.

Many of these migrants stay active in their homelands at the same time that they become part of the place where they settle. They continue to vote, invest in businesses, and participate in civic associations in their countries of origin and buy homes, open stores, and join community groups in the places where they settle. These dynamics challenge long-standing assumptions about how people live and work and about how social institutions function; how and where individuals raise children and care for the elderly; how class, race, and gender are constituted; how livelihoods are earned, the multiple communities with which people identify, and where the rights and responsibilities of citizenship get fulfilled. But while more and more people live transnational lives, they are still served by social welfare institutions that are stubbornly national. The social contract between state and citizen is national while many people's lives are not. What's more, most educational and cultural institutions still speak of national history, literature, and art without locating those firmly and clearly within the global context within which they are produced and given meaning.

Students, researchers, and policy makers must respond accordingly by better understanding the relationship between migrating people and migrating culture. Literature is particularly important for such an endeavor because people construct their lives in narratives and because reading about the experiences of others can inspire empathy. However, because of power inequalities within the global literary field, where Western authors still predominate, the literary narratives currently reaching most readers do not capture the new complexity of the world. English is the new lingua franca (Crystal 2003). In addition, the large majority of literary translations worldwide are translations of English works, followed by works in French, German and Russian (Heilbron 1999, Sapiro 2010). Few books written in non-western languages have ever been awarded the Nobel Prize. In fact, since 1901-2016, 28 Nobel Laureates wrote in English, 14 in French, 13 in German, and 11 in Spanish compared to 2 in Chinese, 1 in Bengali, and 1 in Arabic. It is not that Arabic, Chinese, and Bengali speaking novelists are less talented than their English and French speaking contemporaries. It is that the economics and politics of the global publishing industry have been stacked against them since the 19th century. During this period, English and French literature conquered the world and created unequal structures that were "at once slow to take shape and slow to fade away" (Casanova 2004: 83, citing Fernand Braudel).

Literary studies have been focusing on analyzing these developments from two perspectives: On the one hand, scholars are mapping the globalization of the literary field by studying the evolution and travel of literary forms (Moretti 2005, Moretti 2006), the hierarchical structures

in the global literary field (Casanova 2004), and how literary works change when they travel (Damrosch 2003). On the other hand, they have been analyzing how a global imaginary becomes visible in English literature written worldwide (Damrosch 2014) and in multi-sited and multilingual literary texts written by migrants in the Western world compiled to challenge national and cultural boundaries (Sturm-Trigonakis 2013).

Less attention has been paid to the structures that facilitate or prevent the opening of national and global literary fields to literatures written in non-Western languages and to literary understandings of nations and identities that better reflect people's mobile lives (for rare exceptions see Sapiro 2010, Sievers and Vlasta 2017). We argue that increasing the visibility of these works in national literary canons and the global literary field requires changing how individuals as well as communities construct their existence in narratives. We must understand not only if and where new authors working in a wider variety of linguistic traditions are able to gain attention but how the emergence of literary diasporas changes the boundaries of literary production and consumption. Where are different understandings of nations and identities produced that better reflect people's mobile lives? Which agents, publishing houses, book fairs, festivals and prizes facilitate their public visibility? What is the role of cultural, educational, and political institutions in shaping and responding to these articulations? What kinds of new canons and new organizational strategies do they give rise to? How can we better prepare the next generation of scholars and policymakers to work within this changing organizational and ideological context?

Our conference seeks to explore how and under what conditions canons are successfully challenged and/or how cultural production is being sanctified in different ways. What is it that enables an author from the cultural periphery to ascend from national to regional or global fame? What new forms of codification are emerging? Our approach is consciously interdisciplinary. We seek to involve writers and institutional actors in the global literary field in a conversation with people who study them. We want to bring comparative and world literature scholars in dialogue with sociologists and anthropologists. The conference will also organize some public events including public lectures and readings by some of our participants.

We envision the main topics for our conference to be:

- The State of the Field: What is the intellectual thinking behind new anthologies of world literature being produced inside and outside the West (i.e. China and Japan)?
- Agents and Publishing in the global north and south: Who are the gatekeepers? What do they look for? How can independent publishers remain viable in the current economic climate? What role do international organizations like foundations and UNESCO play? How does this vary across languages?
- Book Fairs and Literary Festivals in the global north and global south: Who comes to these events? How are they supported? What is their role in creating reading publics?
- Prizes, scholarships and other support structures: How do these work? Who are the judges? What are they looking for?
- Authors and Critics: How to overcome national and global literary hierarchies?
- Studying the production and consumption of literature: What do these programs look like in the global north and south? Are they doing anything differently than they did before? What explains how anthologies are constructed? How do we think about these issues when literacy itself is dramatically changing (i.e. reading on-line, texts that include visual culture, graphic novels, etc.)?
- Comparative perspectives: How does the globalization of the literary world speak

to/drive forward/thwart the globalization of music and art? How do these processes vary by region?

We invite paper proposals that deal with the above or other topics related to our general framework. Proposals should be sent to Wiebke Sievers (wiebke.sievers@oeaw.ac.at) by **15 April 2017**. The proposals should include the name and affiliation of the author and a short biography as well as the title and abstract of the proposed paper. The abstract should be no longer than 450 words and should explain the topic, the main conclusions (or the state of the work in progress) and the theoretical and methodological approach of the proposed paper.

Proposers will be informed of whether their paper has been accepted by 1 June 2017. Draft papers are due by 15 November 2017. There may be some funding to offset travels costs but it will be quite limited.

The conference language is English.

We particularly encourage scholars from beyond Western academia to apply.

We aim to publish the results of the conference in an interdisciplinary scholarly publication.

References

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