

PART 1:
BEYOND NATIONS:
ENGAGING LITERARY HISTORIES

2. Introduction to Part 1

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What is the place of the vernacular in literary history? The contributions of the first section all illuminate this question and inevitably also how the vernacular is related to cosmopolitan, global contexts. Literature is understood here to evolve through a constant struggle between the universal and the particular. This essentially historical point of departure allows for a series of problems to be addressed: What is the role of literary fiction in the formation of nations and of a national, cultural identity? What parts do translation and circulation play in the constitution of a literary history? How are authors and works presented and valued differently depending on the agenda of the receiver? As the chapters will show, a literary history cannot be a simple juxtaposition of “national” literatures. Instead, a comprehensive transnational and multilingual approach is needed, one that acknowledges ruptures as well as intercultural connections and one that promotes localised and gendered knowledge. The complex question of canonicity, closely related to power and politics, is also discussed in this section: Who has the power to decide what constitutes a canon? What is the role of minor and peripheral texts to our understanding of canon formation and quality? The section combines systemic, distant-reading approaches with close readings of particular cases, in order to analyse the cosmopolitan and vernacular exchange on a textual level. This double-edged approach resonates with the core premise of the book, namely that world literature can only

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be understood in terms of the dynamic tensions between cultural introversion and extroversion.

Looking at early modern French definitions of the term *vernaculaire*, **Christina Kullberg**'s essay argues that while the vernacular may hold a revolutionary potential, it does not necessarily build on a radical rupture with other languages. Examples are taken from Rabelais's *Le Quart livre* and from a selection of major dictionaries and encyclopedias from the seventeenth century up to the nineteenth century. The purpose is to explore the (French) historical understandings of the term and to see if they can allow for new theoretical possibilities to use the term today.

In "One Country, Several Literatures: Towards a Comparative Understanding of Contemporary Literature in Spain", **Christian Claesson** outlines a comparative approach to the literatures in Spain of today. How did Castilian literature come to represent Spanish literature as a whole? What scholarly attempts have been made to break this monolingual paradigm? How do the vernacular languages of the country relate to the cosmopolitan Spanish? By way of such questions, the chapter problematises the conception of Spain as one single and harmonious entity and of Spanish as its universal expression. As Claesson argues, in order to avoid unnecessary inclusions and historically charged hierarchies, a comparative project would need to avoid naming its object of study "Spanish", "Peninsular", "Hispanic" or "Iberian" literature, and instead study literature *in Spain*, applying a more spatial, and more neutral, characterisation based on the paradigm of the Spanish state.

In a similar vein, yet coming from a different direction and drawing conclusions that contrast with those of Claesson, **Irmy Schweiger** outlines the conceptual framework of modern Chinese literature as an ambivalent nationalistic and coercive vernacularisation project in twentieth-century China. Her essay, "Beyond Chineseness: De-Nationalising and De-Sinicising Modern Chinese Literature", illustrates how the institutionalisation of modern Chinese literature was reinforced by canonisation, language policy and sinocentric identity discourses, framed by Marxist and teleological historiography. In recent years the monolingual and sinocentric mantra has been challenged by

a growing corpus produced by writers with transnational and multicultural backgrounds from Chinese communities worldwide. Drawing on concepts of francophone or anglophone literatures, Schweiger advocates sinophone studies as a counter-hegemonic and analytical tool to de-nationalise and de-sinicise modern Chinese literature.

In his discussion of slave narrative and American literary history, **David Watson** asks us to imagine the vernacular cultures of the antebellum period in relation to various cosmopolitan networks. Theodore Parker's privileging of the slave narrative in the American literary field depends on transnational engagements with European discourses and translation work invisible within Parker's "American Scholar" address itself. As Watson points out, a history of American literature in the antebellum period may very well have to take as its starting point that we cannot take for granted what was meant back then, or even today, by "American", "literature" or even "literary history".

Lena Rydholm's chapter on classical versus vernacular Chinese traces the influence of reformists and writers in the early twentieth century – Liang Qichao, Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu – to show how their calls for reform of language and literature were embodied in a single literary work, Lu Xun's short story "A Madman's Diary". Rydholm shows how their reformist discourse on language and literature confronts literary tradition within this text, through the conflict between the juxtaposed classical, literary language narrative and the modern, written vernacular narrative. Although fiction had low status among intellectuals, it is clearly seen as a potentially effective "vehicle" for reformist discourses; according to Liang, fiction has the power to change people at many different levels as well as their conceptions of the world.

In the final chapter of Part 1, **Katarina Leppänen** contributes with "Reflections on gender and small languages in world literature scholarship: methods of inclusions and exclusions". She argues that gendered perspectives informed by feminist literary studies are often totally absent or activated only as a political context rather than as an analytical literary category. What is more, smaller languages seem to evaporate in highly globalised scholarly practices. Leppänen investigates three themes in her research:

quality, representation, and transfer/translation. She argues that national recovery projects of lost or forgotten authors, including women writers, need to be stepped up to the world literature scale and that gender and feminist issues need to be reflected in anthologies and handbooks, which is not at all the case today.