

**Report Mid-Term Evaluation Riksbankens Jubileumsfond research project**

**Cosmopolitan and Vernacular Dynamics in World Literatures**

**M15-0343:1**

***Introduction***

Thanks very much for inviting us to participate in this evaluation. We are grateful for the opportunity to read the initial proposal and its early reviews as well as the current self-evaluation three years later—and are impressed by all that has been published as part of the project to date. Naturally, the emphases have changed somewhat over the past years. We have a couple of questions about these changes. Above all, we look to the future, and to the expected completion of the four volumes that will weave together, while also furthering, the insights gathered, and the research done.

***Overall Evaluation of Research Gains to Date***

The project's guiding assumptions strike us as well-researched and original. They bring new perspectives to literary study by emphasizing that literature, its language and the 'worlds' it creates are in fact "strategically positioned," both subject to and also agents of a cosmopolitan-vernacular exchange. We agree that this pivotal position has implications for sociological, historical, and political analyses of literature—and of contemporary society.

Focusing on the dynamic interdependence and exchange between cosmopolitanism and the vernacular also offers a new approach to controversial disciplinary discussions of World Literature. Going beyond current debates and beyond systems theory, the group situates its work in the context of interactions, transformations, and productive tensions. Discussing the term "vernacular," the authors remind us of its various linguistic connotations but also note the way it marks spatial, political and temporal specificities, while "cosmopolitanism" suggests a global perspective, but one that must inevitably be situated socially, geographically and temporally.

The vernacular (and all it implies) has become the more central, and in many ways more groundbreaking term in the project, signaling the changeable nature of sociolinguistic and literary values. It helps pinpoint literary 'newness' as process and event, as exemplified in Helgesson and Kullberg's excellent article, "Translingual Events." Conceiving of world literature in terms of its vernacular situatedness also makes for an anthropologically resonant project, a more

“worldly” world literature ready to be studied through multifaceted perspectives and interdisciplinary methods.

This expansive project, conceived as a “view from the north,” yet entailing multiple languages and a number of disciplines has, in the past three years, resulted in a good number of strong journal articles, an updated introduction to world literature studies co-authored by Helgesson and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, and the very useful OA volume: *World Literatures: Exploring the Cosmopolitan-Vernacular Exchange*. Reading through the OA volume as well as the essays sent in preparation for our visit reveals a wide range of topics, methods, and emphases. The richness and diversity of approaches is refreshing, strikingly different from many projects on the topic of World Literature.

In fact, the major task of the coming three years will doubtless be to bring these differences together in four separate yet interrelated volumes, each offering a distinctive set of insights on the topic. Their current working titles indicate these varied emphases:

- 1) “The Vernacular in the Age of World Literatures” (emphasizing language)
- 2) “And Further Afield: Location and Orientation in World Literatures” (emphasizing spatiality)
- 3) “Literature in the age of Global Imaginaries: World-Making Practices” (emphasizing craft)
- 4) “The Semi-Peripheral Condition: Literature, Translation, and Circulation.” (emphasizing translation)

### ***Evaluation of Work to Be Done over the Next Three Years***

#### *Framing the Individual Volumes*

As Helgesson and his team describe in the June 2019 self-evaluation and then repeated in discussions with us about progress on the four volumes, difficulties of coherence remain a challenge. How exactly do these diverse projects connect? How can specializations strengthen each other rather than be diluted in a vague commonality? As the group continues meeting, and its writing moves forward, each volume will need to be pitched so that its specific yet also more general interventions in the field are clearly communicated.

In this effort, it seems to us that the work of framing should be prioritized. That is, it will be important to frame the research within each volume effectively—most likely in their introductions—so that the new viewpoints being advanced will be immediately salient. Clearly, the deep interdisciplinarity of the project deserves emphasis, not only because of the new insights it enables but also because it clarifies the humanities’ effective connections with social science and science research (thereby promoting the underlying importance of the humanities). But it will also be important to highlight one or two particularly important insights that have emerged from these inquiries. At least a good portion of each volume’s introduction might be engaged with this question. Equally important, in our view, will be the need to tie each of the books to the over-arching conceptions of the project. Why is this cosmopolitan-vernacular

exchange so important to keep in mind? What new writerly commerce does it bring to our attention?

### *Overall Framing Statement*

From the wealth of publications submitted to the reviewers it is clear that much work has been done on the central question underlying the entire project, viz. the interaction between the “cosmopolitan” and the “vernacular” in the context of “world literature.” Much of this work also gives evidence of profound reflection on the topic, and of a determination to come to grips with the often confusing and even contradictory definitions and methodologies surrounding the three key terms of the debate. Still, precisely this intense and ongoing engagement with the particulars of the ongoing discussion on the topic in almost all publications presented to the reviewers so far seems to have prevented the project team from arriving at some over-arching statement framing the entire enterprise. We already stressed the need for some introductory framing statement for each of the four integrative volumes rounding off the entire undertaking. These introductory statements should focus on the specific aspects of the cosmopolitan/vernacular dialectic addressed in each of the volumes. From our reading of the publications resulting from the overall project to this point, though, and from our discussions with the PI and his associates in Stockholm, we feel that an over-arching programmatic statement addressing the same dialectic from a more general and theoretical perspective is needed to situate the entire project, and in particular the four integrative volumes as the project’s crowning achievement, within both the historical and the contemporary dimensions of the “world literature” debate. At the same time, such a programmatic statement could usefully also consider parallel developments in scholarly fields relatively closely related to world literature studies, and that address the same or similar questions, such as for instance world history studies. In other words, we see such a programmatic statement as “g/localizing” and “historicizing” the overall project, perhaps – to employ the project’s own terminology - even seeing it itself as a presentist “vernacularization” of a more “cosmopolitan” universalizing approach. Even if any and all case studies contained in the four integrative volumes will undoubtedly prove worthwhile in themselves, and of interest to scholars in the respective disciplines and fields they touch upon as well as in world literature studies, it is the overall theoretical grounding of the project as clearly and unequivocally formulated in such a programmatic statement that will be decisive in determining the project’s final impact. This then also has implications for the team’s decision whether to publish the four volumes as separate books, possibly with different publishers, or as a numbered series with one and the same publisher. If the former, we think that next to the framing statement for the volume in question each volume should also contain the said programmatic statement to enable the reader to properly contextualize the specific volume’s content with respect to the overall research question and the entire project. If the latter, it would suffice to include such programmatic statement as preface to volume 1 of the series.

### *Gender, Race, Class, and Migration*

Much to our satisfaction we have noticed that issues of race and gender are addressed in a number of the (selected) publications submitted to the reviewers. Often these issues surface with respect to matters of migration, whether voluntary or forced, as in cases of slavery or refugees.

While we applaud the consistent attention to these issues demonstrated in the work already done by the team and its determination expressed during the review session in Stockholm to continue doing so in the four integrative volumes currently in preparation, we would also like to raise the issue of “class,” which, certainly from a historical perspective, we see as closely related to those of race and gender. This leads us back to our concern, expressed earlier, that the project be properly historicized and g/localized. As to historicization, while under the influence of postcolonial and gender/sexuality studies race and gender undeniably take center stage in present-day world literature studies, as in literary studies more generally, sight should not be lost of the fact that in earlier avatars of the discipline, not coincidentally in line with concerns articulated by much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature itself, matters of class habitually overrode those of race and gender. Even when the latter were addressed, this was often so in combination with, and not infrequently as subsidiary to, issues of class. In terms of cosmopolitan versus vernacular, this translated into oppositions of, for instance, (international) capital versus (localized) labor, Empire/metropole versus rural/industrial home/region, man’s freedom versus woman’s restrictions. Does class or the socio-economic dimension have a role to play in the texts being analyzed—and might it be discussed historically, or in contemporary manifestations? As to g/localization, next to the heightened focus on issues of race and gender in present-day literary studies mentioned just now, Sweden’s recent condition as a country of immigration and host of a relatively large refugee population also offers compelling topics for a world literature defined through the cosmopolitan/ vernacular nexus.

From our recent discussions with the Helgesson team, we understand that migration and migrant writers will likely have a significant presence in book 2, especially since this is a specialization of Professor Wulff. Though the topic is sensitive today for a variety of reasons, not least because of its tensions with issues of class and inequality, migration has had a major role in cosmopolitan-vernacular exchange since time immemorial (though changing, of course, according to time, space, and language) and is one of the primary ways in which contemporary mobility, sometimes considered the heart of a new World Literature, can most clearly be seen. Scandinavia is a major site now for migration and relocation—and therefore for the transformation of languages and selves. It seems important to highlight migrant writing as it brings notions of cosmopolitanism and vernacular together in ongoing metamorphoses within everyday life as well as in the literary worlds and languages generated. Migrant writers often create new, mixed genres while simultaneously creating fresh linguistic registers and modes. In the Anglophone context, authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Ocean Vuong and Cecilia Vicuña come immediately to mind. Is there a group of migrant writers interesting to highlight for these or similar reasons in the context of Swedish literature? How are these authors reviewed? Are they translated—and if so, by whom?

#### *Bibliomigrancy, Translation, and New Media*

Various project publications hitherto realized address the issue of bibliomigrancy, and we understand that also in the integrative volumes, and particularly in volume 4, this will be a major concern. However, from what we have seen in the articles sent to us, the phenomenon is most frequently examined from the perspective of the migration of languages, genres and texts. An

important dimension of bibliomigrancy is, of course, the actual migration or circulation of books as material artifacts: publishing, printing, selling, distribution, etc. What are the “cosmopolitan” centers of book production and distribution? What happens when books move to “vernacular” locations? How do vernacular cultures receive, or resist, such cosmopolitan hegemonies? What are the strategies for hegemonization? Or is the existing unequal relationship in this regard between cosmopolitan centers and vernacular locales unintended? What role is played by price settings, copyrights, book clubs, chain bookstores, etc.? How have these matters developed over time, or at least over the period covered by the project? This implies at least looking at the methods and (some of the) findings of the relatively recent field of “Book Studies.” Some attention has surely been paid to this in discussions of the “semi-periphery” when treating translation—and more may well be planned. If not, we encourage the group to investigate the field more deeply. We miss serious emphasis on this issue in what we have seen so far.

When dealing with translation and bibliomigrancy, we would also urge the group to expand its attention to new media and digitization. What does this movement in space and time mean for readers and for authors of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How does it differ from—and in many ways transform—the book or library culture of the past? Is there a distinctive cosmopolitanism of the internet and how is it situated, localized? We see that this topic is clearly flagged in the self-evaluation as a central field still requiring further research and writing. We believe this will be an important addition to the work as it now stands.

### *International Collaboration*

In the original proposal for the project strategic network partnerships are mentioned with Montpellier, Leeds, Aarhus, and Oslo. In the self-evaluation not much is said about these partnerships except for some joint activities and a number of guest lectures or seminars by international partners hosted at Stockholm University. The same thing goes for the international advisory board linked to the respective areas of research outlined in the proposal and about to be consolidated in the four integrative volumes planned. International collaboration, then, has been less intense than one originally should have wished, hoped, or planned for. As cause for this lack of time – on both sides – is invoked. We understand that for many of the prestigious members of the advisory board this is indeed an issue – the more prestigious the harder to find time in their agenda. Still, we wonder whether some more institutionalized collaboration would not be possible when it comes to the four integrative volumes: could these international scholars, or at least some of them, along with your strategic network partners, be used as sounding boards for drafts of these volumes? Could a review session of the draft volumes be organized with (members of) the international advisory board?

### *Where Do We Go from Here?*

From the Cosmopolitan/Vernacular Exchange volume as well as from the selected publications submitted to the reviewers and the list mentioned in the self-evaluation it would seem that many of the projects listed in the original proposal have already been realized – so “where do we go from here”? We understand that for the next three years the four integrative volumes will form the team’s main focus of attention, and in the mid-term evaluation session the PI and his three

associates stressed that these volumes are a collaborative undertaking and that they will be co-written by all team members. Still, we assume that the main responsibility for these volumes will rest with the four volume coordinators and with the PI supervising the overall project. The question then arises as to what exactly the remaining members of the team will do for the next three years: will they continue to write individual articles and/or books alongside their task as co-writers or contributors to the collective integrative volumes? What is the general timing from now till 2021 – Conferences? Symposia? Workshops? Publications planned? Some of these, especially in the shorter run, are mentioned in the self-evaluation, but what in the somewhat longer run? And what about the specific task of the PI beyond the supervision of the overall project and the progress of the four integrative volumes? We understand that he will be involved in all four volumes, presumably doing part of the co-writing and coordinating. Beyond and above this, though, it is our opinion that he should also concentrate on the programmatic statement mentioned above. We also wondered whether the PI, and his team, is/are planning a follow-up, perhaps in the form of an ERC grant?

### *Pedagogy*

A clear legacy of the grant is already expressed in its pedagogical outreach. The teaching theme under the auspices of the Doctoral School in Humanities at SU, “World Literature and the Culture of Texts,” is now attracting a substantial number of students. The two Masters courses—Kulling and Watson’s “World Literatures: Theories, Geographies and Movements” (UU) and Alling and Tenngart’s “Literature and Intercultural Understanding” (LU)—also have a following. These teaching programs are apparently also sites for the creation and dissemination of work done on the project (we think, for example, of the OA volume already used in classes at LU), assuring that the next generation of scholars will profit from the current collaboration. If the project continues, and its teaching programs can accommodate international scholars and (even more importantly, international students), it will likely have a notable impact on the rising generation. Indeed, if the Helgesson group can link visible teaching programs to its far-reaching research, it might well make Sweden an increasingly important “northern center” for the study of world literature. For this reason, as well as for the contribution such courses and themes make to contemporary education, the group’s pedagogical efforts should, we believe, continue to be supported.

### *Conclusion*

As mentioned in our opening paragraph, the two reviewers are more than happy with the work delivered during the first three years of this project’s duration. Obviously, they have a number of critical remarks, inspired by their own backgrounds and knowledge – including the limitations thereof – and by their gauging what the present-day situation is of literary studies in general and world literature studies in particular. In fact, their critiques are a sign of their engagement with the work presented, and with the questions this work raises and addresses, an engagement undoubtedly also to be expected from the wider scholarly community interested in the field, and – it is to be hoped – from the wider society, as the questions addressed here concern not just

scholars but each and every citizen, not just in Sweden but around the world, each and every one of them according to her or his specific social, economic and political conditions. In this sense, the project under review is an explicit response to the “so what?” question so often directed these days at humanities scholars in general and literary scholars in particular. As such, though not without some recommendations as to possible avenues for further research and writing, we unhesitatingly recommend continuing the project for another three years and seeing it through to its final resolution with the completion of the four integrative volumes.

Respectfully submitted, 28 September 2019

Sandra Bermann, Princeton University

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sandra L. Bermann".

Theo D'haen, KU Leuven/University of Leuven

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Theo D'haen".