

H-France Review Vol. 11 (December 2011), No. 259

Christie McDonald and Susan Rubin Suleiman, eds., *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History*. New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2010. xxiv + 546 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-231-14740-8; \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-231-14741-5.

Review by Arcana Albright, Albright College.

*French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* is a remarkably innovative and insightful volume of twenty-nine essays that aims to “world” French literature from the Middle Ages to the present, that is, to read it from a perspective that underscores negotiations with otherness and boundary crossings both within and beyond France’s borders. *French Global* is not exhaustive—nor does it intend to be—but instead offers a roadmap for readers to explore the tensions between multiplicity and unity, diversity and universality, “same” and “other” that underlie every period of French literature, including some of its most canonical texts.

*French Global* challenges the idea of an unproblematic unity between French as language, French as literature, and French as nation, a notion that structured the earliest French literary histories, notably Jean-Marie Napoléon Désiré Nisard’s *Histoire de la littérature française* [1] and Gustave Lanson’s *Histoire de la littérature française*. [2] Instead, the essays in *French Global* examine and underscore the multiple points of contact that found and inform French literary space, a space created by individuals with diverse origins, concerns, and allegiances both inside and outside of France. The volume not only illuminates French literary and cultural history, it offers a new conception of what constitutes a national literature, one that considers language and nation in their multiplicity.

Following in the footsteps of *A New History of French Literature*, to which several of the authors contributed some twenty-one years prior, *French Global* offers an unconventional, highly informative, and thoroughly readable approach to French literary and cultural history. [3] It is markedly different from its predecessor, however, in its global approach, an approach that problematizes the categories of “French” as well as “Francophone.” Editors Susan Rubin Suleiman and Christie McDonald explain in their introductory essay, “The National and the Global,” that discussions around world literature have informed their approach, in particular David Damrosch’s theory of world literature as an “elliptical refraction of national literatures” (p. xvii). [4] Literature, in the editors’ view, is less about canon formation or its contestation than about a critical approach that espouses the “productive perplexity that results from seeing things from more than one perspective” (p. xix). In its emphasis on French but in a global setting, the volume resonates with the arguments of Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés who “reject the ‘teleological’ model of writing national literary history, without abandoning the notion of linguistic specificities” (p. xvii). [5]

Divided into three parts—Spaces, Mobilities, and Multiplicities—each of which contains roughly ten essays organized more or less chronologically from the Middle Ages to the present, *French Global* presents a range of critical perspectives. Written by twenty-nine prominent and promising scholars, primarily from the United States but also from France, Canada, Nigeria, and England, the essays investigate a wide array of subjects and texts, some in the canon and others outside of it. The essays

range in length from thirteen to twenty-two pages and have copious endnotes. The volume has an extensive bibliography compiled from the individual essays and an exhaustive index.

In what follows I will discuss a variety of the essays so as to provide an idea of the volume's content, scope, and purpose. Sharon Kinoshita's inaugural essay, "Worlding Medieval French," defines "worlding" as a critical stance that seeks "not merely [to] increase representation of previously ignored or underrepresented cultures, but rather [to] present both dominant and emerging cultures as dynamically related within specific historic and economic contexts" (p. 4). Her essay discusses how Old French was a Mediterranean vernacular that encompassed an expansive geographic area ranging from the courts of Anglo-Norman England to the Mongol capital of Khanbalik. Francophone readers and authors in the Middle Ages were thus part of a literary network that connected Asia, Europe, and Africa. Putting into question the idea of medieval French literature as the locus of a "pristine protonational culture or identity" (p. 18), she demonstrates that French literature has been from the beginning a *littérature-monde*.

Kimberlee Campbell's essay, "Speaking the Other: Constructing Frenchness in Medieval England," follows a similar path, examining multilingualism in England after the Norman Conquest and what might be called England's Francophone culture. Campbell also discusses how in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the idea of Frenchness was contingent on a redefinition of Englishness. France, she argues, was created "as much from without as from within" (p. 191). In his essay, "'There's a New World Here': *Pantagruel* via Oronce Finé," Tom Conley reads Rabelais' *Pantagruel* through the mathematician and cartographer Finé's cordiform world map of 1534 in order to gain insight into the nature of the newly "global" world, as it became known in France after 1525.[6] Phillip John Usher's essay, "Walking East in the Renaissance" considers how several Renaissance narratives represent counterpoints to the ethical openness of Montaigne in that they express an "underlying fear of cultural pollution" (p. 199). Whereas Ronsard's *Hymnes* [7] make of the Ottoman Empire a "containment area for malevolency" (p. 199), the first full-fledged pilgrim guidebook, written by Henri de Castela, encourages pilgrims to pretend to be deaf and mute so as to avoid dialogue with local inhabitants.[8]

Faith E. Beasley in her essay "Versailles meets the Taj Mahal" discusses how cultural contact with India from the early to mid-seventeenth century influenced the culture of what would become France's "Grand Siècle." Beasley traces the destabilizing forces of two imports from India, *toiles peintes* and diamonds, and suggests that the Sun King's political ideology and expression of power through luxury and its visual display was inspired by his Indian counterpart Shah Jahan. Beasley contends that cultural diversity became valued in seventeenth-century France due to accounts written by seventeenth-century travelers to India, such as François Bernier's *Histoire de la dernière révolution des états du grand Mogol*. [9] In her essay, "Negotiating with Gender Otherness: French Literary History Revisited," Danielle Haase-Dubosc traces several moments in French literature where the binary system of gender is put into question and where gender is shown to be malleable. Christie McDonald's essay "On the Ethnographic Imagination in the Eighteenth Century" examines how French writers in the eighteenth century, including Rousseau, Diderot, Montesquieu, Graffigny, and Voltaire, created different points of view in order to critique the status quo of French society. McDonald discusses how finding "a sense of a unified humanity within a world of differences" (p. 238) is just as relevant in France today as it was for these eighteenth-century writers. In his essay, "Specters of Multiplicity: Eighteenth-Century Literature Revisited from the Outside In," Yves Citton destabilizes the image of the eighteenth century as an "enduring dream of unity" (p. 372) in which universal rationality reigned and instead shows it to be a cultural site that "experienced, cultivated, and theorized diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity" (p. 373), as evidenced both in the development of the Oriental fairy tale and in the circulation of a multiplicity of publications that represented an "uncontrollable superabundance of unauthorized discourses" (p. 377).

In “The Voyage and Its Others: Nineteenth-Century Inscriptions of Mobility,” Janet Beizer considers how Flaubert’s *Correspondance* and travel notes speak to the question of the identity of the traveler as shifting between a national and a global axis.[10] Maurice Samuels, in “Jews and the Construction of French Identity from Balzac to Proust,” examines representations of Jews by non-Jewish writers in nineteenth-century France and demonstrates how fictional Jews embodied anxieties related to modernity. He also considers how the first Jewish writers in French used fiction “as a laboratory for experimenting with solutions to the problems of Jewish modernity” (p. 412). By remembering the forgotten writers Eugénie Foa and Ben-Lévi, Samuels sheds new light on the question of minority identity and minority literature in nineteenth-century France. Michael Sheringham’s essay, “Space, Identity, and Difference in Contemporary Fiction: Duras, Genet, Ndiaye,” discusses the “charged geographies” (p. 451) of postmodern writing, where borders are provisional and where there is a “constant reversibility in the relations between self and other, East and West, North and South, reality and fiction, the near at hand and the apparently (or formerly) remote” (p. 451). In her essay, “Choosing French: Language, Foreignness, and the Canon (Beckett/Némirovsky),” Susan Rubin Suleiman considers writers who grow up with a non-French language and write in French but whose personal history is not linked to colonialism. She discusses Samuel Beckett’s tremendous impact on French literature, noting that he not only entered the canon but also transformed it. Would the *nouveau roman* exist had Beckett not written in French? Suleiman also traces Irène Némirovsky’s path from best-seller in the 1930s to obscurity to post-humous best-seller in 2004 with the previously unpublished *Suite française*. [11] Written during the first years of the German occupation, the book is “a coldly ironic indictment of the French establishment...to which she herself had aspired to belong” (p. 479). In 1942 Némirovsky was deported to Auschwitz as a foreign Jew.

In her essay, “Critical Conventions, Literary Landscapes, and Postcolonial Ecocriticism,” Françoise Lionnet discusses how Francophone writers engage with their native environment through the mediation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French texts. The result, in Lionnet’s view, is a “creolization of the *National* literary landscape” (p. 130). Christopher L. Miller, in “The Slave Trade, *La Françafrique*, and the Globalization of French,” traces the origins of global French in the history of the French slave trade. His essay considers the question of whether there is “any escape possible, in politics or in literature, from the permanent binarism of [the] relationship between France and its former colonies” (p. 243). He discusses the adoption of the Taubira Law in 2001 declaring slavery and the slave trade crimes against humanity as well as the 2007 manifesto “Pour une littérature-monde en français” as attempts to “overcome the condition of absence, ignorance, and marginalization regarding the (former) colonies that has characterized French society since the seventeenth century” (p. 249). Gisèle Sapiro’s “French Literature in the World System of Translation” traces the institutionalization of the “paradigm of the foreigner” (p. 299) to the creation in 1830 of university chairs in foreign literatures. These chairs, Sapiro maintains, shaped the perception of translated literature as representative of a national culture, thus “removing literature from the universal” (p. 299). It was only from that time on, she argues, that the notion of a “French literature” developed. Shapiro examines how translation reveals changes in the book market but also in the collective unconscious of a culture. In “Intellectuals without Borders,” Lawrence D. Kritzman considers the identity crisis that France has undergone over the past few decades, noting that “the irony of the postcolonial world is that the colonized have now immigrated to the land of their former colonizers, thereby challenging the very concept of homogeneity that France was based on” (p. 321). He discusses the various ways that public intellectuals such as Etienne Balibar, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Jean-Luc Nancy put into question the idea of a community based on boundaries, real or psychological.

Each essay in this volume both stands alone and dialogues with others, with subjects resurfacing in multiple essays both within and across the three sections, a reflection of the multiple points of contact and border-crossing under examination in the essays themselves. The editors acknowledge that the placement of individual essays into the volume’s three parts—Spaces, Mobilities, and Multiplicities—is

to some extent arbitrary, as borders often are, and they invite the reader to rearrange them, in other words, to “world” their own reading practices.

*French Global* is an invaluable text for students and scholars of French-speaking literatures and cultures. It will undoubtedly influence French and Francophone studies in the years to come, inspiring scholars to create additional paths that approach literature and culture from a global perspective.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Introduction: Susan Rubin Suleiman and Christie McDonald, “The National and the Global”

Sharon Kinoshita, “Worlding Medieval French”

Tom Conley, ““There’s a New World Here”: *Pantagruel* via Oronce Finé”

Jacob Vance, “The Global and the Figural: Early Modern Reflections on Boundary-Crossing”

Eric Méchoulan, “Globality and Classicism: The Moralists Encounter the Self”

Jérôme Brillaud, “From the Rectangle to the Globe: Theater in the Ancien Régime”

Natasha Lee, “Planetary Perspectives in Enlightenment Fiction and Science”

Evelyne Ender, “Homesickness in an Expanding World: The Case of the Nineteenth-Century Lyric”

Françoise Lionnet, “Critical Conventions, Literary Landscapes, and Postcolonial Ecocriticism”

Verena Andermatt Conley, “Literature, Space, and the French Nation-State After the 1950s”

Alison Rice, “All Over the Place: Global Women Writers and the Maghreb”

Kimberlee Campbell, “Speaking the Other: Constructing Frenchness in Medieval England”

Phillip John Usher, “Walking East in the Renaissance”

Faith E. Beasley, “Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal”

Christie McDonald, “On the Ethnographic Imagination in the Eighteenth Century”

Christopher L. Miller, “The Slave Trade, *La Françafrique*, and the Globalization of French”

Janet Beizer, “The Voyage and Its Others: Nineteenth-Century Inscriptions of Mobility”

Sylvia Molloy, “Traffic in Translation: Rereading Supervielle”

F. Abiola Irele, “From the French *Roman Colonial* to the Francophone Postcolonial Novel: René Maran as Precursor”

Gisèle Sapiro, “French Literature in the World System of Translation”

Chapter 20: Lawrence D. Kritzman, “Intellectuals Without Borders”  
 Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, “Language, Literature, and Identity in the Middle Ages”  
 Danielle Haase-Dubosc, “Negotiating with Gender Otherness: French Literary History Revisited”  
 Yves Citton, “Specters of Multiplicity: Eighteenth-Century Literature Revisited from the Outside In”  
 Emily Apter, “Speculation and Economic Xenophobia as Literary World Systems: The Nineteenth-Century Business Novel”  
 Maurice Samuels, “Jews and the Construction of French Identity from Balzac to Proust”  
 Lise Gauvin, “Traversal of Languages: The Québécois Laboratory”  
 Michael Sheringham, “Space, Identity, and Difference in Contemporary Fiction: Duras, Genet, Ndiaye”  
 Mylène Priam, ““Présence Antillaise”: Hybridity and the Contemporary French Literary Landscape”  
 Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Choosing French: Language, Foreignness, and the Canon (Beckett/Némirovsky)”

## NOTES

- [1] Jean-Marie Napoléon Désiré Nisard, *Histoire de la littérature française* (Paris : Firmin-Didot, 1874).
- [2] Gustave Lanson, *Histoire de la littérature française* (Paris : Hachette, 1912 [1894]).
- [3] Denis Hollier, ed., *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- [4] David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- [5] Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés, eds., *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- [6] François Rabelais, *Pantagruel*, edited by Guy Demerson (Paris: Seuil, 1996).
- [7] Pierre de Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols., edited by Jean Céard, Daniel Ménager, and Michel Simonin (Paris : Pléiade, 1994).
- [8] Henri de Castela, *La Guide et adresse pour ceux qui veulent faire le s. voiage de Hiérusalem* (Paris : L. Sonnius, 1604).
- [9] François Bernier, *Histoire de la dernière révolution des états du grand Mogol* (Paris : Barbin, 1670).
- [10] Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, edited by Jean Bruneau (Paris: Pléiade, 1973-2007).
- [11] Irène Némirovsky, *Suite française* (Paris : Denoël, 2004).

Arcana Albright  
Albright College  
[aalbright@alb.edu](mailto:aalbright@alb.edu)

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172