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Migration literature as a new world literature? An overview of the main arguments

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La littérature migrante contemporaine est actuellement fréquemment applaudie comme « une nouvelle littérature mondiale ». La présente contribution passe en revue les arguments principaux de cette discussion. Il s'agit de montrer quand et pourquoi la notion de « nouvelle littérature mondiale » est apparue. Ensuite, on souligne la place réservée à la littérature migrante dans les recherches sur la littérature mondiale. La conclusion comporte une réflexion succincte sur comment mettre à profit l'application de certains aspects de la théorie de la littérature mondiale dans les recherches sur la littérature migrante.

Contemporary migration literature is increasingly heralded as a 'new world literature'. This working paper presents a brief overview on the main arguments advanced to sustain this claim. It will address the question of when and why the term 'new world literature' came about. It will highlight the place of migration literature in research on world literature and conclude with a brief reflection on some aspects of world literature theory and their possible contribution to scholarship on migration literature.

A cursory glance at the scientific discourse on migration literature in Europe of the last two decades shows that it is increasingly heralded as a 'new world literature'. The main argument of this claim is that migration literature transcribes the experience of everyday

life in a globalized world and reflects on the challenges of existence in multicultural and multilingual contexts. In his definition of the term, Ottmar Ette stresses that, apart from multilingual content and engaging in globalization discourses, new world literature needs to reflect them on the level of narrative and poetic structure[1] as well.

This shift towards world literature, which some might read as yet a new turn in the naming of writing by migrant writers, therefore deserves to be looked at more closely. So does another, far more recent trend, which has so far gone unnoticed in criticism on migration literature, but which can be interpreted as the legitimation of the above claim: namely that migration literature is on the way of becoming a topic in world literature studies too, where it does indeed constitute a new area of research. The object of this paper is to reflect on these parallel processes and to provide some preliminary insights on the topic. It will address the question of when and why the term “new world literature” came about. It will highlight the place of migration literature in research on world literature and conclude with a brief reflection on some aspects of world literature theory and their possible contribution to scholarship on migration literature.

The fact that today migration literature is frequently called “new world literature” raises interesting questions concerning the naming of the genre in general. The veritable avalanche of terms and concepts used to categorize it in the past has often been commented on. “Gastarbeiterliteratur[2]”, “littérature des immigrations[3]”, “littérature des Beurs[4]”, “Black British Literature[5]” are just a few of the formulas offered to describe the genre. The shift from “Gastarbeiterliteratur” to new world literature is, beyond the taxonomical complexity, revealing of the changing imperatives that underlie the different tendencies of naming this type of literature. In fact, we can observe

- a clear move away from the focus on the sociological and ethnic origin of the producers of migration literature (“Gastarbeiterliteratur”, “Ausländerliteratur”, Black British Literature) which branded the genre as a phenomenon marginal to national literature
- *via* the stress on the location of migrant writing in-between cultures (“littérature sans domicile fixe[6]”, “interkulturelle Literatur[7]”) the belonging of migrant writing to any one national literature is put into question
- and finally the confirmation of its anchorage in world literature (“littérature-monde”[8], “littérature du Tout-monde[9]”, “New Internationalism[10]”), makes the issue of belonging to national literatures redundant.

The incentive to consider migration literature, and indeed postcolonial literature under which it is sometimes subsumed, as world literature stems from Homi K. Bhabha's actualization of Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* which, according to Bhabha, offers itself to transcribe the "*unhomely* condition of the modern world". In his seminal work *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha writes: "The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness'. Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature[11]."

Before migration literature was discussed in terms of world literature, it was, along with postcolonial literature emerging from the centres of the old empires, sometimes called 'world fiction', as was the case in Great-Britain for instance. The term is pervasive in the early reception of authors such as Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Timothy Mo, Ben Okri, etc. As Bruce King explains, the term 'world fiction' refers mainly to migrant writers who "write about their native lands or the immigrant experience from within the mainstream of British literature[12]". In her book *Global playing in der Literatur. Ein Versuch über die Neue Weltliteratur* (2007), Elke Sturm-Trigonakis discards the term as merely a PR-stratagem targeting the well-minded Western reader for whom world fiction becomes the site where s/he can question her/his own ideological imprint. She further criticizes the term for its focus on the Western literary market and its readership[13]. What she fails to recognize, however, is the influence that the paradigm of British world fiction had in fueling the discussion about the reception of migration literature in continental Europe. In Germany, this discussion took place in the 90s in a number of articles published in weekly newspapers such as *Die Zeit*[14], where the favorable response towards migrant writers in Great-Britain was referred to in order to question the marginalization of migrant writers in Germany. Fritz Raddatz[15], for instance, inquires after the existence of "German Rushdies", whereas Andrea Böhm[16] pleads for a new world fiction in German when she compares Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Aras Ören, Güney Dal and Zafer Şenocak to Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Derek Walcott and Michael Ondaatje.

British world fiction is also the starting point for Jean Rouaud and Michel Le Bris in their manifesto “Pour une littérature-monde”. The reference is made explicit in Le Bris’ contribution to the volume. Commenting on the fact that in autumn 2006 five of the seven major French literary prizes had gone to foreign-born authors, Le Bris sees here “les indices d’une évolution des sensibilités, sinon d’un basculement d’époque. À rapprocher du surgissement des enfants de l’ex-Empire britannique dans l’espace littéraire anglais, au tournant des années quatre-vingt, lorsque à la suite des *Enfants de minuit* de Salman Rushdie ceux-ci commencèrent à rafler Booker Prize après Booker Prize. Historique, donc, ce moment : l’acte de décès d’une certaine idée de la francophonie, perçue comme un espace sur lequel la France dispenserait ses lumières au bénéfice, il faut donc le supposer, de masses encore enténébrées. La fin de cette francophonie-là, et l’émergence d’une littérature-monde en français[17].”

However debatable the concepts of world fiction and littérature-monde may be – the latter has been severely criticized both in France and outside[18] – the fact is that they are revealing of the interconnectedness of the reception of migration literature in various European literatures. Furthermore, very early on, the term of world fiction was used to stress **“**the cosmopolitanism, the universalism and the displacement of uprootedness[19]” underlying the stylistic innovations introduced by writers representative of what Bruce King has called, in 1991, the New Internationalism in British fiction[20] and which still constitutes the ground to the claim discussed here.

Apart from themes treating global issues and aesthetic innovations, the appeal of the concept of world literature in discussing migration literature derives from Goethe’s statement on the redundancy of compartmentalizing literature into national literatures: “National-Literatur will jetzt nicht mehr viel sagen; die Epoche der Welt-Literatur ist an der Zeit, und jeder muss jetzt dazu wirken, diese Epoche zu beschleunigen[21]”. Goethe’s idea offers scholars a way of viewing the location of migration literature from a new angle, one that allows them to bypass the discussion about whether or not it belongs to a given national literature. This is the case for instance in Heidi Rösch’s article “Migrationsliteratur als neue Weltliteratur” (2004), focusing on literature in German, which in turn provides one of the frameworks for Eva Hausbacher in her discussion on Russian literature in her study *Poetik der Migration. Transnationale Schreibweisen in der zeitgenössischen russischen Literatur* (2009).

Both Bhabha’s idea of the ‘unhomely condition of the modern world’ and Goethe’s

statement of the redundancy of national literatures clearly underlie Rösch's explanation as to why migration literature does qualify as world literature and should be studied as such: "So greift Migrationsliteratur z.B. das Thema Migration (im weitesten Sinne) auf und schafft interkulturelle Erzählformen, in denen verschiedene ethnische Gruppen, Kulturen und Sprachen in Beziehung zueinander treten. In vielen Fällen ist sie ethnisch mehrfach adressiert. Migrationsliteratur ist interkulturell und interlingual produziert, unterstützt eine multiperspektivische Rezeption und nimmt dominanzkritische Haltungen ein. Damit erfüllt sie das von Kerst Walstra in die Debatte gebrachte Kriterium, Weltliteratur wandle zwischen den Kulturen in ganz besonderer Weise. Sie wandelt nicht nur zwischen den Kulturen, sondern sensibilisiert für ‚das Dazwischen' [...][22]." Rösch's conclusion is echoed by Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniela Merolla in the introduction to their book *Migrant Cartographies. New cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe* (2005) in which they highlight the need to discuss migration literature in the context of European literature rather than in that of national literatures only: "Within the European scenario it is high time to ask when an idea of European literature will supersede the national literatures, or when migrant literature will be an object of comparison without having to pass via the national canon[23]."

Goethe's idea that world literature is „less a set of works than a network [...] that had a fundamentally economic character, serving to promote 'a traffic in ideas between peoples, a literary market to which the nations bring their intellectual treasures for exchange[24]", provides scholars of migration literature with another important starting point to consider the question of the circulation of the migrant book. In her article "The Location of Literature: the Transnational Book and the migrant writer" (2006), Rebecca Walkowitz, focusing on literature in English, examines the sites of production, reception and global circulation of English literature, noting that "these questions turn from production to circulation, and back again, reflecting a new emphasis on the history of the book and what Leah Price calls 'the geography of the book' within postcolonial studies and world literature[25]". As a producer of the transnational book, the migrant writer and the new world literature he represents are central to her analyses on the transformation of literary cultures, a point that is also stressed by Heidi Rösch when she talks about the increasing fluidity of production and reception sites of migrant literature. "Viele der in deutscher Sprache verfügbaren außereuropäischen Texte sind von Autoren mit

Migrationserfahrung verfasst, so dass eine herkunftskulturelle Standortbestimmung für diese Texte genauso schwierig ist wie für die Migrationsliteratur und in vielen Fällen auch gegen die Intention des interkulturell produzierten Textes gerichtet wäre. Entsprechend trifft hier das [...] Verständnis von Weltliteratur als Literatur, die ihren Ursprung nach nicht mehr an einen Ort gebunden ist, zu[26].”

The inclusion of migration literature into the studies of world literature may be considered as an outcome of the fundamental revision that the concept and indeed the methods for studying world literature have undergone these last few decades. When the 1995 Bernheimer report urged comparatists working on European literatures to abandon the sole focus on English, French, German, and Spanish literatures, in order to look to “minority literatures [that] also exist within Europe[27]” the recent focus on migration literatures in Europe seems to follow this advice.

As stated earlier, migration literature has only recently become a subject in world literature studies. In the 2012 *Routledge Companion to World Literature* edited by Theo D’haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir and the *Routledge Concise History of World literature* by Theo D’haen, prominence is given to postcolonial literature while migration literature is referred to only indirectly. This is the case, for instance, when Robert J.C. Young, in his contribution on “World Literature and Postcolonialism” to the aforementioned *Routledge Companion*, comments on the rise of “a new genre of transnational writing which has never been national, often written by diasporic authors” and which is “typically global in scope, concerned with Western and non-Western subject matter[28]”.

Mads Rosendahl Thomsen is among the first to attribute migration literature a place in world literature in his 2008 study *Mapping World Literature – International Canonization and Transnational Litertatures* in which a whole chapter deals with the topic of “Migrant writers and Cosmopolitan Culture”. In doing so, Thomsen follows in the footsteps of his eminent forbearer Georg Brandes, who, in his major work *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*, first published in Danish between 1872-90, dedicated the first of the six volumes to *Emigrant Literature*[29] (1872). Thomsen writes that “Brandes sees the literature of the migrants as a defining movement in the 19th century, propelled by the turmoil of the French revolution, and the importance of the migrant writers and the

general spirit of transnational movement is obvious”[30].

Thomson makes a persuasive argument when he says that the inclusion of migration literature into world literature is legitimated by the way it renegotiates or reevaluates the cosmopolitan dimension[31] at the heart of world literature. More interesting still is his establishment of a continuum of migrant writing in Europe in the 20th century when he discusses the importance of migrancy for modernist and high modernist writers such as James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov, all of which are usually considered extraterritorial rather than migrant writers. By focusing on the theme of belonging and unbelonging and by analyzing the influence that migrancy has had on their writing, along with the formal inventions they introduced to reflect on the changing perception of individual and national identity in the aftermath of World War I and World War II[32], Thomson manages to link them to contemporary migrant writers. While isolating the themes they have in common, Thomson avoids gross generalization by pointing out the distinct historical and literary contexts and conditions that give rise to migrant writing of the different periods. Finally, it is in the continuation of the Modernists' cosmopolitan aesthetics that Thomson sees the value of migration literature's contribution to world literature: “The migrant and cosmopolitan writers are thus located at the centre of an international cultural shift that is tied to numerous other small changes in human's interaction with the world: however, there are no other media as reflective as literature, or as dense in the experiences it carries with it. Migrant writing is thus the writing of a world wherein the ideas of place, nation and identity are more complex than ever, and as such reveal how the strange and the familiar can and will mix in people's lives[33]”.

As this overview clearly lays bare, a closer collaboration among scholars in the fields of migration and world literature is surely desirable. World literature studies will find in migration literature the necessary material to further research on cosmopolitanism which, as Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza[34] has convincingly argued needs to take the increasing internationalization of literatures into account more thoroughly.
Concerning our project, it may be worthwhile to take a closer look at Franco Moretti's 'world-system theory', at Pascale Casanova's concept of 'literature as a world' and at David Damrosch's idea of world literature as an elliptical system. They may provide us with new approaches and angles of addressing the question of the location of migration

literature outside of the context of national literatures, furnish us with useful guidelines as to the transnational reception processes underlying migration literature in Europe and enlighten us on the travel and metamorphoses of literary forms and genres in this new kind of cosmopolitan writing. This is not to suggest that theory and methods common in world literature studies can be applied indiscriminately. Indeed, the focus that the concept of 'original culture[35]' retained in the aforementioned models when discussing the original national context of a work and its international circulation, is not entirely unproblematic in our case given that the question of the original cultural location of the migrant text can no longer be determined. On the other hand, this may well be one of the points on which scholars on migration literature could actively participate in the research on world literature.

1 .

Ottmar Ette. „Einleitung – von ‚Literaturen ohne festen Wohnsitz". In: Elke Sturm-Trigonakis , *Global Playing in der Literatur. Ein Versuch über die Neue Weltliteratur*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2007, p. 13-25, p. 20.

2 .

See Irmgard Ackermann. „Gastarbeiterliteratur als Herausforderung". In : *Frankfurter Hefte*, 38.1, 1983, p. 56-64.

3 .

See Charles Bonn (dir.). *Littérature des immigrations. 1 : Un espace littéraire émergent*, coll. : « Études littéraires maghrébines», n° 7, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1995 ; Charles Bonn (dir). *Littératures des immigrations. 2 : Exils croisés*, coll. : « Études littéraires maghrébines », n° 8, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1995.

4 .

See Michel Laronde. *Autour du roman beur. Immigration et Identité*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1993.

5 .

Nicola Pitchford. „Black British Writing”. In : *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*, vol. 1, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 195-199, p. 195.

6 .

Wolfgang Asholt, Marie-Claire Hoock-Demarle, Linda Koiran and Katja Schubert. *Littérature(s) sans domicile fixe – Literatur(en) ohne festen Wohnsitz*, Tübingen, Gunter Narr, 2010.

7 .

Carmine Chiellino (ed.). *Interkulturelle Literatur in Deutschland. Ein Handbuch*, Stuttgart-Weimar, Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2000.

8 .

Michel Le Bris, Jean Rouaud(dir.). *Pour une littérature-monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007.

9 .

Edouard Glissant. *Traité du tout-monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997.

10 .

naît quelque chose de nouveau -monde, Paris, Gallimard, 1997. Bruce King. „The New Internationalism: Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta, Timothy Mo and Kazuo Ishiguro“. In: James Acheson (ed), *The British and Irish Novel since 1960*, London, Macmillan, 1991, p. 192-212, p. 193.

11 .

Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, (1994) 2007, p. 17.

12 .

Bruce King. „The New Internationalism: Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta, Timothy Mo and Kazuo Ishiguro“, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

13 .

Elke Sturm-Trigonakis. *Global Playing in der Literatur. Ein Versuch über die Neue Weltliteratur*, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

14 .

See Immacolata Amodeo. „Anmerkungen zur Vergabe der literarischen Staatsbürgerschaft in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland“. In: Aglaia Blioumi (ed.), *Migration und Interkulturalität in neueren literarischen Texten*, München, iudicum Verlag, 2002, p. 79-92.

15 .

Fritz J. Raddatz. „In mir zwei Welten. Deutschsprachige Literatur von Ausländern. Gibt es einen deutschen Rushdie?“. In: *Die Zeit*, 24. Juni 1994, n° 26, p. 45-46, p. 45.

16 .

Andrea Böhm. „Zwischen die Fronten geraten. Derek Walcott, Michael Ondaatje, Rafik Schami: Die Literatur verarbeitet die Entwurzelung von Menschen multiethnischer Herkunft“. In: *Die Zeit*, 18. Februar 1999, n° 8, p. 16.

17 .

Michel Le Bris. „Pour une littérature-monde en français“. In: Jean Rouaud, Michel Le Bris (eds.). *Pour une littérature-monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, p. 23-55, p. 24.

18 .

Theo D’haen. *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature*, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 146-151.

19 .

Bruce King. „The New Internationalism: Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta, Timothy Mo and Kazuo Ishiguro“, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

20 .

When commenting on the influence of postmodern aesthetics on postcolonial writing, Manfred Schmeling outlines the origin of the aesthetics underlying this so-called new

world literature : „Les paramètres littéraires d'hybridité et de différence ne sont pas en eux-mêmes les conquêtes d'une 'nouvelle littérature mondiale', mais plutôt l'émanation de l'esthétique postmoderne et de la théorie postmoderne en général. Ce n'est qu'en relation avec des objectifs socioculturels particuliers qu'il naît quelque chose de nouveau" (Manfred Schmeling. „Réflexions sur la mise en forme esthétique des conflits culturels dans le roman moderne". In: Jean Bessière et Sylvie André (éds.). *Multiculturalisme et identité en littérature et en art*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2002, p. 405-415, p. 414).

21 .

Johann Peter Eckermann. *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*. Herausgegeben von Heinz Schlaffer, München, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1986, p. 207.

22 .

Heidi Rösch. „Migrationsliteratur als neue Weltliteratur". In: *Sprachkunst*, 35/1, 2004, p. 89-109, p. 107-108.

23 .

Sandra Ponzanesi, Daniela Merolla (eds.). *Migrant Cartographies. New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2005, p. 4.

24 .

Fritz Strich. *Goethe and World Literature* (1949) is quoted by David Damrosch in *What is World Literature?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 3.

25 .

Rebecca Walkowitz. „The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the migrant writer". In: Rebecca Walkowitz (ed), *Immigrant fictions. Contemporary Literature in an Age of Globalization*. In: *Contemporary Literature*, Winter 2006, vol 47, n. 4, p. 527-546, p. 528.

26 .

Heidi Rösch. "Migrationsliteratur als neue Weltliteratur", *op. cit.*, p. 107.

27 .

Charles Bernheimer. „The Bernheimer Report, 1993. Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century“. In: C. Bernheimer (ed.), *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism,* Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, p. 39-51, p. 45.

28 .

Robert J.C. Young. „World literature and postcolonialism”. In: Theo D’haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 213-223, p. 215.

29 .

See Svend Erik Larsen. “Georg Brandes: the telescope of comparative literature”. In: Theo D’haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 2132.

30 .

Mads Rosendahl Thomsen. *Mapping World Literature. International Canonization and Transnational Literatures*, London and New York, Continuum, (2008) 2010, p. 76.

31 .

“In a globalizing world, migrant writers are particularly interesting as emblems of the cosmopolitanism lived out by an increasing number of people, no matter whether their own bodies move, or their interaction with the world has changed due to shifts in their own society and the media they use” (*Ibid*., p. 62)

32 .

Ibid., p. 82.

33 .

Ibid., p. 100.

34 .

See Aseguinolaza, F. C. 2006. „Dead, or a Picture of Good Health? Comparatism, Europe and World Literature“. In: *Comparative Literature*, 58, 4, p. 418-435.

35 .

“A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin” (David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, *op. cit.*, p. 6)