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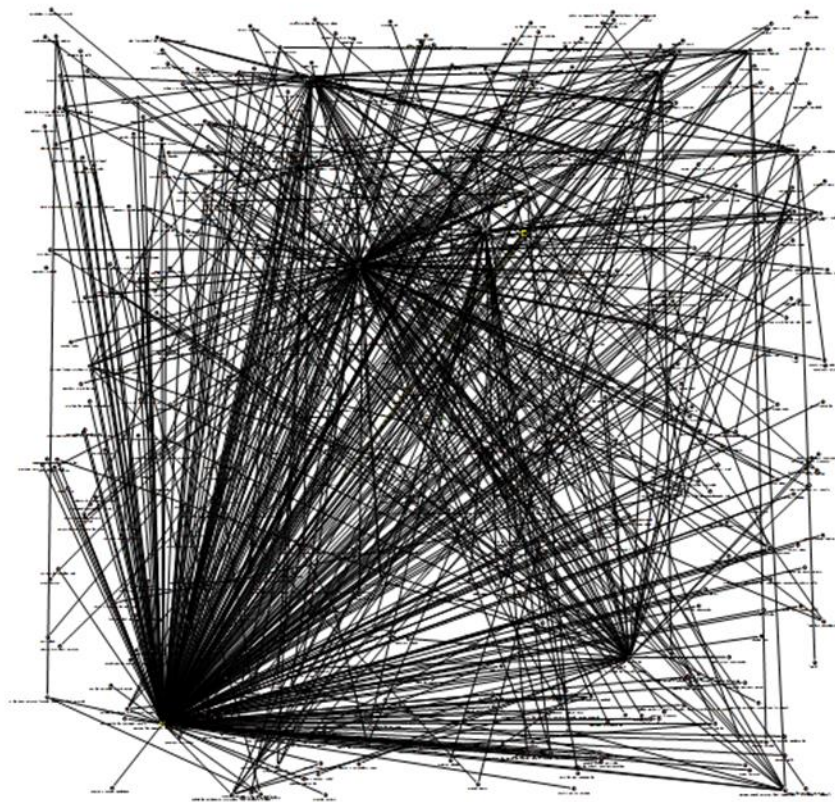
Nature of Connections (1)

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The transnational reception of women's writing at the fringes of Europe
(Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain)

Henriette Partzsch, University of Glasgow

<http://travellingtexts.huygens.knaw.nl/>



Judith Rideout: Visualisation of the connections between the contributors writing in several Spanish magazines edited by women, ca. 1880-1914

Many thanks for inviting me to this first research day about the nature of connections at the University of Bristol. I am really excited to be here because connections are at the very heart of the research project which I am leading, so this is a fantastic opportunity to reflect on connections and discuss how they can inform new angles of research. The research project is called *Travelling Texts, 1790-1914: The Transnational Reception of Women's Writing at the Fringes of Europe (Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain)* – you can see the whole team on the slide – and in my talk I will give you a brief overview of the different ways in which connections inform our work.

I will spare you the detailed history of the project; suffice to say that our main starting point was the diagnosis of a rather disturbing lack of attention to connections in the study of the literature of the past. We think that this lack of attention is an important factor that leads to a very partial inclusion of women writers in literary histories, and not only of women writers but actually the overwhelming majority of writers, of all kinds. As feminist scholars we found it not only unsatisfying but deeply suspicious that women writers seemed to inhabit the space of the monster in the great narratives of national literary achievements. In many national histories of literature they tended to be treated as isolated and anecdotal incidents at the margins, as exceptions rather than a constituent part of the literary culture of the past; quite often, they were confined to a kind of gilded cage in the form of separate subchapters in national histories of literature. We therefore questioned the strategy of rescuing from oblivion one woman writer, and another one, and another one and still another one to remedy this situation because it clearly is not very effective.

Instead, it confirmed Mario Valdés's warning that counterhistories all too often remain add-ons, leaving the mainstream mostly unaffected because they remain disconnected (You can find the quotation on the hand-out. Together with the references to the main sources).

1. A relational approach to literary culture

We therefore take a relational approach in our project, with the aim of placing women writers within literary culture during the long nineteenth century. We want to understand how they were connected: how and up to which point did women writers interact with what kind of audiences as well as with each other, and how did their contemporaries react to them? Or, to put it even simpler: who was read and translated where, and what was said about them?

In order to answer these questions, first and foremost we have to map the circulation and reception of women's writing in our five fringe countries (I will come back later to the notion of "fringe"). We do this by inventorying nineteenth-century translations and by scouring historical sources for evidence of reception. Our sources consist mainly of nineteenth-century library or booksellers' catalogues and the historical press. Thus, we link our travelling texts back to their material vehicles and the historical practices of circulation and consumption, through places and spaces such as libraries, bookstores, series of publications or the home.

We are emphatically **not** interested in reading and interpreting individual texts at this point, but in finding the **connections** created through reading and writing; we engage in 'distant reading', to use Franco Moretti's terminology. Although I find it at times really difficult to actually abstain from reading when I come across

such enticing titles as *The Rabble of Spain or Secrets of the Capital City*, the effects of not-reading are extremely interesting: for the first time in my life as a literary scholar I start to appreciate the wood instead of being completely absorbed by the contemplation of some beautiful trees.

Now, a wood is of course much more than an accumulation of trees: it is a complex system that is shaped by different forces, inhabited by a variety of beings and defined by the connections between its constituent elements. Although we know that the wood is there when we contemplate some of its trees, this knowledge tends to remain in the background; as far as literary history is concerned, thanks to my very thorough university teachers I was of course aware that publishers, the market, institutions, readers, literary conventions had and have important functions for literary works; however, it is something very different **to really focus on and try to understand** how all these elements are inextricably entwined, creating in this interaction the dynamics of literary culture.

And this is precisely what I mean when I speak of a relational approach to literary history: a relational approach brings to the fore the dynamic connections between the interdependent factors which produce and shape literary culture, whereas the notion of culture as a “set or stock of evaluable goods”, which is the foundation of any attempt to build a canon of texts, fades into the background. If we achieve to situate women in these dynamic relations, we do have a chance to avoid the trap of the unconnected add-ons, the trap of the black holes into which our counterhistories tend to disappear. Instead, we will be able to contribute to a better understanding of literary culture as a whole because we will be able to ask and, hopefully, answer different questions.

[You may have noticed that I am toying here with ideas belonging to system theory, in particular poly-system theory, the strand developed by the research group around Itamar Even-Zohar. I must say I find these ideas extremely inspiring but I still have to get to grips with the best ways of applying them.]

2. Transnational connections

I have said a bit earlier that we take the circulation and reception of women's writing as our starting point, rather than for instance names of specific authors or titles of specific texts; and that we are thus linking our travelling texts to their material vehicles and historical practices of consumption. Thanks to this decision, another dimension of connectedness becomes visible in our research: the **transnational** connections that permeate and link the literary systems under study. This is not surprising: although the national paradigm, favoured by many historians of literature, was and is reinforced by national institutions that influence literary culture, hardly any reader (and the category of reader includes of course authors and publishers) limits their choice of reading to texts that originate inside the boundaries of a specific nation-state or cultural area, as long as other texts are available to them in an accessible language: texts can travel very easily. However, travelling texts can be perceived and appropriated in different ways. While some texts from abroad were definitely read as being representative of a foreign culture, following the romantic understanding of literature as the expression of the spirit or the soul of a nation, other texts seem to have answered the urgent need for copy in a time of expanding literary markets; given that readers were and are by no means a homogeneous group, the

positioning of one and the same text often oscillates between these two extremes.

An example would be the case of the arguably most successful woman author of the nineteenth century both in Europe and the Americas, I am speaking of course of the French novelist George Sand (despite the immense popularity of Jane Austen products in our own time). Sand's many detractors, alarmed by the popularity of a writer who transgressed gender rules and sympathised with socialist ideas, routinely depicted Sand as the embodiment of an immorality that was branded as "typically French"; her writing was thus presented as opposed to a national and decent womanhood, properly understood. On the other hand, much of Sand's overwhelming popularity was precisely due to the fact that so many readers in the whole of Europe identified themselves not only with her protagonists but also with the author herself. As van Dijk and Wiedemann have shown, it is almost impossible to overestimate the influence that Sand's writing exerted on other women, inspiring many of them to take up pen and paper and try their hand at writing.

This example also illustrates the reasons why we have decided to use the term 'transnational' rather than 'international' or 'transcultural' in the context of our project. Basically, the term allows us to sit comfortably on the fence: 'transnational' points toward connections that cross and at times transcend national borders while it preserves at the same time the notion of the existence of national boundaries, be they stable, changing or emerging. We argue that it is very important to capture this sometimes contradictory and oscillating movement in the context of nineteenth-century nation building, expanding markets and a

growing international mobilization fighting for different social and political causes.

And of course these forces and developments affected the literary systems, too: from very practical considerations, such as having to navigate national press laws or running syndicated fashion magazines across borders, to the positioning of writers and readers between national ideologies and transnational allegiances. We believe that this transnational dynamics may have been especially important for the activities of women writers, given that a woman's belonging to a nation was often not straight-forward but mediated through her father or husband; Spanish women for instance were supposed to automatically acquire their husband's nationality if they married a foreigner.

Furthermore, the ties that link country, territory, nation and state are in themselves dynamic and changing. This becomes evident when we look at the very diverse countries that we connect in and through *Travelling Texts*. Our research group is only possible thanks to the international collaboration of the national research councils of Great Britain, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Slovenia in the framework of Humanities in the European Research Area; nevertheless, it is problematic to simply project back onto the past the identity of the five countries mentioned in the title of the project, assuming that somehow they have always already been there (just to clarify: with 'identity' I strictly mean, with the OED, 'the quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties'). Instead, we must accept and deal with the problem that it is extremely difficult and probably impossible to define the exact

limits of a specific literary culture, since we are dealing with open systems which develop over time.

Our five countries experienced quite dramatic changes during the long nineteenth century: People, or at least some people, in three of our five countries, in Finland, Norway and Slovenia, were working toward an independent nation state during the period under study, but this does not mean that borders and constitutions remained stable in the other two, in the Netherlands and Spain; they did not. Identifying a culture or a nation with a language is no solution, either: in all our cultural areas we find the presence of several languages; and the use of specific languages and even the form of languages, for instance modern written Norwegian, are shaped by changing power relations, including the effects caused by the development of national projects.

To give you just one, very brief and simplified example: if we look at Slovenia, which was part of the Habsburg Monarchy during our period of study, we can see that German language publications played a very important role and that many texts circulated in the original German or in German translations among a readership that was at least bilingual. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, publications in Slovene become much more prominent and there is an increasing interest in authors and texts from the Slavonic language area.

Now, if we focused on Slovenian language texts only, we would automatically exclude much of the cultural experience of the people who lived in Slovenia, who were identified as Slovenian by others or who (always or sometimes) self-identified as Slovenian; we would reify a closed model with not much room for the unexpected. However, a relational approach can sidestep this

problem of delimitations and definitions in a, I find, rather elegant way. As soon as a specific entry point into a literary system has been chosen, let's say the first Slovenian woman's magazine *Slovenka* [Slovenian Woman] or the main German speaking press publication, the *Laibacher Zeitung* [Ljubljana News], we can follow their connections into different directions, toward the factors with gravitational pull, such as for instance prestigious national institutions, or away from them, toward the fringes. This means that we are interested in the relative position of our objects of study, the relative position of our travelling texts and their vehicles of circulation, in terms of: closeness or distance to other cultural products and players, their level of connectedness and the direction of the connections. Accordingly, we do not aim at defining an exact location, a precise point on an abstract grid, but rather a sense of place where we can situate a cultural product, such as for instance a magazine, or a cultural player, her activities and her texts. The paths that lead to other places are an integral part of this sense of place. Exclusion and inclusion become therefore a relative category of analysis rather than a *fait accompli*, and their perception will change according to the place from which the analysis is articulated.

3. Fringes

And this reflection leads us to the notion of fringes, since we have decided to articulate our own analysis from a set of places which we like to call "the fringes of Europe". We use this term to refer to the rather motley collection of literary cultures we are studying in *Travelling Texts*, a selection of countries which usually astonishes people when they first come across our project. Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia and Spain have indeed not that much in common:

Finland, Norway and Spain are peripheral geographical outposts of Europe, while the Netherlands and Slovenia could be rather described as thoroughfares; the size of all five countries and of their population are very different, which means that for the biggest country, Spain, we will not be able to document even the tip of the iceberg, whereas our Slovenian team will get very close to capturing all relevant data that exist. I have already briefly mentioned important political and historical differences relating to the development of our countries as nation states.

However, our five countries are connected through a negative trait: none of them firmly belongs to the imaginary “heart of the Europe of nations” as it emerged from the Napoleonic Wars; this place was and often still is occupied by England, France and “Germany”. And our maps of European literature reflect this hegemony: We have a very well charted centre, which can be customised by adding some of the more exotic “small” cultures, which appear to be optional and replaceable in comparison to the unavoidable core. As a result, we are used to looking at the exchanges between individual national literatures, on the one hand, and (parts of) the imaginary heart of Europe, on the other, or the circulation of one particular national literature across Europe (this last exercise is usually of most interest to the national literature in question). This approach has of course delivered valuable and interesting results; however, there is the danger of naturalising this map of European exchanges by ascribing the status of universal norm to the development

s at the “heart” and seeing the rest as interesting extras – a mechanism very similar to the one that keeps women writers at the outskirts of literary history.

We therefore try to complicate and de-naturalise existing centre-periphery models – and when I say existing centre-periphery models I am thinking for instance of Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*. This denaturalisation already starts with the collaborative research process itself.

Connecting research on five countries through a shared methodology and on a completely equal footing forces us to adopt a multi-polar view on European literary culture and to question many of our spontaneous assumptions about culture and history and literature. The fact that we have chosen five countries from the literary, political and/or geographical fringes of Europe has, however, more far reaching consequences. This choice means that we are turning our usual map of literary exchanges inside out; it means that we have to leave behind the relatively well-researched routes that lead from the cultural centres to the peripheries. Having said that, we do not propose a counterhistory of the peripheries but a flexibility of perspective, a flexibility of entry point into the European literary system, which in turn will allow us to look for and map routes and connections that otherwise may go unnoticed.

To illustrate this, let's return to French novelist George Sand. Significantly, her example shows how texts written in a culturally dominant language spread from a cultural centre, Paris, to its periphery. But was the movement of texts really so unidirectional? Did texts also travel directly between peripheral cultures, or were encounters necessarily mediated through a centre? And through which centre(s), given that during the long nineteenth-century the five chosen countries gravitated towards or were part of different spheres of cultural influence - Russia, Great Britain, the predominantly German speaking countries, France... Did the

reception of successful writers nevertheless follow similar patterns at the fringes of Europe? Did women writers in our five countries react differently when they read texts originating from the cultural centres and when they encountered a fellow woman writer from another fringe country?

These questions also explain why I have emphasized that we are **sidestepping** the centres, by entering the European literary system from a different point. We do not want to exclude the centres from our approach, but we are only interested in their literary culture inasmuch as it reaches the fringes of Europe, for instance in the guise of George Sand's texts. Her example demonstrates that studying the reception of texts written by women in our five fringe countries will necessarily lead us to women's writing in Europe as a whole and beyond, and this is excellent – we just make sure that we capture the movement and specific routes, focusing on the importance of relations and connectedness, as Ottmar Ette has pointed out in his discussion of Transarea Studies.

We don't know yet how our dynamic, inside-out, gendered map of European literary culture will look in the end – and we expect that we will arrive at some stunning visualisations, with the help of our ICT developers - but as we are compiling more and more data in our Virtual Research Environment we start to see patterns, we do get first insights. And even if we may never find evidence of animated direct exchanges between women writers in Norway and Spain, we will nevertheless develop a better understanding of the participation of women writers in nineteenth-century literary culture: we will have a better map that will lead us to those women who played a major role in transnational literary relations, a map that will lead us to places that played a crucial role in

transnational exchanges, a map that will allow us to make different, but informed decisions about what texts, authors, publications, institutions may warrant further, more intensive study. I very much hope that this will be the moment when I can finally return to *The Rabble of Spain or Secrets of the Capital City* for a session of very thorough reading.

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Once such repressions have been established in the tradition, they become the black holes of literary history that prompt the emergence of counterhistories, which examine these areas of cultural activity in isolation. Such is clearly the case with gay and lesbian literary historical studies or the historical study of women's writing from earlier periods. A plethora of works that deal historically with the repressed material does not produce a massive corrective of the tradition since these counterhistories will be mere add-ons for the interested user of literary history and will not be central for the tradition; therefore, these works will not affect the general user of literary history. (p. 65)

A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO LITERARY HISTORY

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[I]nstead of concrete, individual works, a trio of artificial constructs – graphs, maps, and trees – in which the reality of the text undergoes a process of deliberate reduction and abstraction. 'Distant reading', I have once called this type of approach; where distance is however not an obstacle, but **a specific form of knowledge: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection**. Shapes, relations, structures. Forms. Models. (p. 1)

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ETTE, Ottmar: *Viellogische Philologie: Die Literaturen der Welt und das Beispiel einer transarealen peruanischen Literatur* (Berlin: edition tranvía – Verlag Walter Frey, 2013).

Wollte man – gewiß stark konturierend – eine transareale Wissenschaft im Sinne eines transdisziplinären Verbunds verschiedenster Forschungsbereiche der *TransArea Studies* von traditionellen komparatistischen Ansätzen unterscheiden, so ließe sich sagen, daß die letztgenannten die Politiken, Gesellschaften, Ökonomien oder symbolischen Produktionen verschiedener Länder statisch miteinander vergleichen und gleichsam gegeneinander halten, während eine transareale Wissenschaft mehr auf die Bewegung, den Austausch und die wechselseitig transformatorischen Prozesse hin ausgerichtet ist. Transarealen Studien geht es weniger um Räume als um Wege, weniger um Grenzziehungen als um Grenzverschiebungen, weniger um Territorien als um Relationen und Kommunikationen. (p. 61)

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