

Literature at Work in Colonisation and Globalisation: *Uses and Ambivalences of Literary Production in Global Power Contexts, c. 1850–1980*

Date: 11th and 12th February 2027

Venue: Maison des Sciences Humaines, Université Libre de Bruxelles

From the height of nineteenth-century imperial expansion through the political and cultural aftershocks of decolonization into the 1980s, literature has been deeply entangled with processes of colonisation and globalisation, not only as a reflection of historical change but as an active agent in shaping representations, power relations, and social hierarchies. Literary texts, genres, and narrative forms have participated in the production of knowledge about distant territories and populations (Cohn, 1996; Prat, 1992), contributed to the normalisation of imperial worldviews, and mediated encounters between the local and the global. Rather than being framed purely in aesthetic terms, literature has functioned as one of the media through which political, economic, and cultural logics of expansion have been articulated, negotiated, and legitimised – raising, in turn, broader questions about the autonomy of the literary field in relation to economic and political power (Bourdieu, 1992; Sapiro, 2003).

In the context of modern globalisation, literature has increasingly intersected with industrial, commercial, and corporate structures. The rise of mass publishing, company-sponsored periodicals, educational texts, and promotional narratives blurred the boundaries between literature, media, and economic practice, complicating standard narratives of a literary market free from patronage (Sawaya, 2014). Literary forms were mobilised to legitimise industrial modernity, to construct narratives of progress and civilisation, and to align cultural production with the interests of global enterprises (Marchand, 1998, Rappaport 2017). At the same time, literature often remained a space of tension and ambivalence (Bhabha, 1994), where dominant discourses were reworked, questioned, or subtly resisted, revealing the contradictions inherent in globalising projects.

The conference brings together perspectives that view literature not only as a cultural artifact but also as a social practice embedded in concrete historical, institutional, and economic contexts. This includes attention to how literary forms and ideas travel and are reshaped across borders through cultural transfer (Espagne, 1999) and transnational literary networks, and to the position of peripheral and semi-peripheral literary spaces within an uneven global literary field (Casanova, 1999; Moretti, 2000). By also focusing on the material conditions of literary production and circulation – publishing infrastructures, corporate patronage, transnational media networks, and linguistic hierarchies – the conference invites a rethinking of the role of literature in global processes of domination, negotiation, and exchange. Particular attention will be paid to forms of “functional” or “instrumental” literature – texts produced to serve an institutional, commercial, or political purpose, such as company magazines, promotional narratives, or propaganda – which have often remained marginal in literary historiography despite their significant impact on global cultural flows. Building on insights from literary studies, history, media studies, sociology, and

postcolonial theory, the conference seeks to create a space for an interdisciplinary dialogue on how literature has operated within, alongside, and sometimes against colonial and globalising forces.

Relevant topics include (but are not limited to):

- Literature and colonial administration
- Corporate literature, company magazines, and industrial publishing
- Cultural transfer and transnational literary networks
- Postcolonial and decolonial readings of literary globalisation
- Literature and media in the context of global industries
- Peripheral, semi-peripheral, and non-hegemonic literary spaces

Selected References

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1992) *Les Règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Paris: Seuil.
- Casanova, P. (1999) *La République mondiale des lettres*. Paris: Seuil.
- Cohn, B. S. (1996) *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dobrenko, E. (2001) *The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture*. Translated by J. M. Savage. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Espagne, M. (1999) *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Marchand, R. (1998) *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Moretti, F. (2000) 'Conjectures on world literature', *New Left Review*, 1, pp. 54–68.
- Pratt, M. L. (1992) *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge.
- Rappaport, E. (2017) *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sapiro, G. (2003) 'The literary field between the state and the market', *Poetics*, 31(5–6), pp. 441–464.
- Sawaya, F. (2014) *The Difficult Art of Giving: Patronage, Philanthropy, and the American Literary Market*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Turner, C. (2003) *Marketing Modernism between the Two World Wars*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Submission Guidelines

Please submit **an abstract up to 300 words**, along with **a short biographical note**, to barbora.svobodova@ulb.be by **11th November 2026**.

Notifications of acceptance will be sent by **30th November 2026**.

Organised by Barbora Svobodová (Modernitas, ULB) and funded by the European Union under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Postdoctoral Fellowship programme (Grant Agreement No. 101211819, Project MSCA PF – Lit-In-Soc: Literature – Industry – Society between Colonialism and Globalisation: The Role of Literature and the Corporate Press in the Global Activities of the Bata Concern).