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Updating & Globalizing Francophone Studies

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My contribution focuses on race and racism as dimensions of literature, cinema, and the scholarship devoted to them.

One of the questions raised for this Salon is how the examination of race and racism has changed in our discipline over the last two decades. Though there's certainly little cause for optimism where racism is concerned, I think it's important to acknowledge the major shifts that have occurred in French literature as an academic field over the last two or three decades. In the 1980s, "francophone" literature (which was and remains shorthand for works by authors from former French colonies or that reflect France's postcolonial diversity) was a marginal subfield. It enjoyed second-class status and seemed to stand outside the main conversations in literary history and theory. Attitudes toward francophone literature indeed rested on colonial and racial prejudices: it was considered derivative and lacking in aesthetic complexity. But a major restructuring has since occurred. "Francophone" texts now figure widely in course syllabi and examination reading lists. Journals and book series have proliferated and departments and programs have been renamed to reflect the reconfiguration of the field.

These changes have, however, been far more significant in the US, Canada, and the UK than in France. Though recognition of talented writers from former colonies or minoritized communities has certainly increased in France, this hasn't led to a widespread incorporation of "francophone" writers in high school or university curricula. This slow adoption fits into a bigger, more familiar picture, that is to say, the limited impact of postcolonial studies on French intellectual life and the reluctant recognition of race as a category of social and political analysis.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the lukewarm reception of francophone literature has extended to former colonies, which have largely failed to embrace this body of work as a regional or national tradition. For example, despite Algeria's powerful tradition of nationalism, few Algerian authors figure on high school or university curricula. Language politics has been one factor in this outcome, but other issues, including internalized colonial attitudes and the calculated indifference of the state have also played a role.

Francophone studies were long dominated by two bifurcated approaches: regionalist studies of, for example, "Caribbean" or "Maghrebi" culture, and explorations of migration and multiculturalism in France. Current scholarship is, however, breaking down this divide and reframing cultural geographies. Recent books have highlighted transnational and trans-colonial dynamics and the "multidirectionality" of memory. Several recent studies examine colonial racism

in conjunction with the history of race and racism in Europe, drawing connections between colonial violence and the Holocaust. Yet there are still several ways in which the field as a whole adapts to changing social and political dynamics including new economies of race and racism.

With some notable exceptions, francophone literary scholarship has been oriented toward the past, i.e., towards colonialism, slavery and the wounds of decolonization. Research on Algerian literature, for example, has centered on the War of Independence and the “black decade” of the 1990s. These historical perspectives are crucial, but they can also represent a kind of intellectual shelter from current events and can lead to a problematic telescoping of the present with the past. There’s room, now, for a turn to emergent voices, and to the social and political issues confronting us today.

Consider, as a case in point, migration as a subject of contemporary literature and film. Migration is obviously occurring today on an unprecedented global scale, challenging established national and international orders and demanding new ethical and political models. Political theorists, anthropologists and human geographers have begun to adapt to the new realities of what Shailja Patel has called “migritude,” exploring the biopolitics of humanitarianism and detention, and inventing new forms of fieldwork and engaged scholarship. Cultural representations of migration, on the other hand, are evolving more slowly.

Migration and diaspora have been central subjects of francophone literature and cinema since the early 1980s. So-called “Beur” and “banlieue” literature and film explored the multigenerational effects of migration, the hybridity of cultural identities and experiences of racial minoritization. Their dominant genre was the *Bildungsroman*, which, broadly speaking, retraced the journey from migration to integration. These narratives grew out of the regime of colonial labor migration that existed from the 1940s to the mid-1970s. The landscape of migration today is, however, profoundly different. The vast majority of migrants are “undocumented”; their journeys aren’t linear and they often extend over many years. In addition, the racism and xenophobia directed at migrants have intensified. Contemporary racism has indeed aggregated previous modes of prejudice from colonial racialization to the atavistic fear of barbarians at the gate. Its most chilling feature the tacit acceptance that migrants are, as Seloua Luste Boulbina puts it, “supernumeraries.” As “undocumented” people, their lives don’t count and their deaths aren’t counted. Racism has once again become a practice of eracism.

These changing conditions have many implications for the arts. Established genres such as novels and feature films simply don’t lend themselves to the depiction of the open-ended and multilingual realities of contemporary migrations. Future representations of migration will have to explore different forms, experimenting with alternative genres and media. Perhaps the most crucial issue is that of voice and the political agency to which it at least indirectly contributes. Migrants of previous generations were often able to look back and narrate their own migration stories. The conditions of migration today don’t allow for this retrospective gaze, let alone for writing or film-making. In the short term, the model of testimony seems to provide the best opportunity for first-person accounts, which are a crucial defense against the prevalent erasure of migrants’ perspectives and voices.

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