

**Canon Factory Project (Emergence programme; research teams VALE and REIGENN-Sorbonne Université)**

**« Taking a shot at the canon” Symposium, Sorbonne Université, Paris, France. June 19<sup>th</sup> - June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025**

The concept of literary canon is deeply paradoxical. That there is such a thing as the canon mostly goes unchallenged. However, its definition can hardly be called clear cut and its boundaries, i.e. what belongs in the canon, are far from being consensual. The canon can be (and has been) diversely defined as the almost holy repository of texts with unquestionable and unparalleled literary merits; it is also understood to include the texts which set out and best represent aesthetic principles which, on account of their exemplariness, become normative standards. Those texts are therefore endowed with a potential to spawn dutiful and indebted imitations. Canonical works are furthermore often perceived as the pillars upon which a given high-brow culture rests and as authoritative must-reads. Knowing and acknowledging these texts and their merits is a token of cultural – and to a large extent social – belonging.

However convenient, by doing away with the parameters of time and place, these definitions deceitfully posit the stability of the canon. To put it differently, what holds the very notion of literary canon together are the always-already unreachable principles of self-same identity and immutability. Yet what the literary canon is and which works and authors are under its aegis are matters primarily influenced by the passing of time and by space. As noted by Didier Alexandre and Michael Bernsen: “Le canon des érudits du XVI<sup>ème</sup> siècle diffère de celui du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle, sans que l’on puisse réduire ces différences à la seule référence au monde culturel gréco-latin” (“The canon of 17<sup>th</sup> century scholars differs from the 20<sup>th</sup> century canon, and the differences do not merely concern the references to ancient Greek and Roman culture”, Alexandre and Bernsen 2017, 7).

Against all-male and all-Western canonicity champion Harold Bloom (Bloom 1994), it could be argued that the open-ended, oft-reshuffled and updated list of canonical works and authors varies quite significantly from one part of the (Western) world to another too. If the canon exists, as a blurry or, in more positive terms, as a multi-faceted and dynamic by-product of literature, then it cannot be thought of independently from the forces that give it its (perforce transient) shape and authority, which could be metaphorically described as the “canon factory”. As argued by feminist art historian Griselda Pollock (Pollock 1999, 3-21; 2007, 45-69), two great fallacies lie at the heart of canonicity. One is that the celebrated works’ quality is self-revealed, obvious, and therefore universally valid. The other is that an author’s belonging in the closed club of canonized peers results exclusively from an outstanding self-accomplishment. Those claims aptly conceal that a subjective (and ideologically slanted) agency is involved in elevating them to their exemplary status. To Pollock the canon-makers and the authors they have foregrounded have been male, white, heterosexual and, to this day, the canon has been both the repository and defence line of their power.

Who and what is at work in creating the literary canon, in other words what are the gears that crank the canon factory? In the wake of a two-year series (2023-2025) of one-day conferences, the concluding symposium of the Canon Factory project will aim, in a first line of inquiry, at exploring further the definition and analysis of the institutions and people involved in delineating the canon in the four linguistic and cultural areas chosen as investigation fields: the Dutch-language, English-language, Germanic, and Scandinavian literatures.

At the latest with the rise of feminist, post-colonial, gender and queer theories, the canon and its makers have been at the heart of what Pollock names “culture wars”. The critique of their hegemony or, in David Fishelov’s parlance, the opposition to “the beauty party” by the “power

party” (Fishelov 2010, 30-43), prompted by the desire for acknowledgement by marginalized groups, has developed alongside attempts at legitimizing literary productions at odds with the coterie of glorified writers and texts. The movement has certainly made room for new forms and aesthetics to emerge within the field of the literary and, in an anti-elitist stance directed at “liberal humanist education” (Löffler 2017, 7), for their value to be acknowledged more widely (and beyond the confines of authoritative circles). It has also possibly resulted in the rise of a lower-key canon, which Christine Meyer names a “‘real’ or ‘factual’ canon”. The latter, she claims, “would forever be the transitory fruit of an ongoing process of development and renovation of the works of reference (‘Kanonbildung’)” (Meyer 2023, 29).

The criticism of the canon, whether on ideological, on aesthetic terms, or both, together with the gradual acknowledgement of thus far marginal and ostracized voices and texts will form the second thematic research focus of the conference. With a greater emphasis on more recent evolutions, it will consider more specifically developments in postcolonial, decolonial, LGBTQAI+, performed literatures (from radical theatre experiments to spoken word and slam poetry) as well as comics and graphic novels. What happens once the old canon factory has been called into doubt?

In a recent *Guardian* column entitled “Do We Need To Dismantle the Literary Canon?”, author, educator and journalist Jeffrey Boakye asserts that, at least as far as school curricula are concerned: “The temptation is to make the pendulum swing away from all those stale, pale, able-bodied males and replace them with something different, something ‘other’, authors who have been marginalised by race, gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality”. Yet he advocates a less radical stance which gives pride of place to educators’ subjectivity and lived experience in putting together a curriculum, defending that “the curriculum is anything we want it to be” and that a personal canon will emerge from “curating something new, pruning, rummaging and bringing things together in unexpected ways” (*The Guardian*, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

What exactly is this “something new”? Does it or not require frontal opposition to the time-haloed canon and to the so-called legitimate culture? This is the third major area the conference will aim at circumventing by considering in particular the creation of new, alternative canons and by raising the cognate question of the (im)possibility of dispensing with the notion of canon altogether. What strategies, conversely, are implemented by the authors who refuse to be engulfed by new canonicity, in particular because, as pointed out by Henry Louis Jr. Gates in a desacralizing phrase, “the literary canon is, in no very grand sense, the commonplace book of our shared culture” (Gates 1992, 21)? And is their maintained marginal status not a paradoxical, if lonely, attempt at self-canonization?

We welcome 30-minute papers in English or French on the Dutch, Germanic, and Scandinavian linguistic and cultural areas of the project or adopting a comparative perspective on two or more of them. Of particular interest will be talks addressing (without necessarily being limited to):

- canonization process(es): diachronic discussions of fluctuations in the canon; the influence of literary prizes, publishing houses, university and school curricula, anthologies, academies and national canons; canonicity and the mass / social media
- the canon questioned: “culture” and “canon wars”, origins, forms, extent; “writing back”, postcolonial literature, decolonial praxis, (post)migration literature; the negotiation of enhanced visibility by thus far acanonical forms and authors: experimental writing, performance literature, LGBTQAI+ works, inter- multimedial productions (comics, graphic novels); sociolects, dialects

- new canons: institutionalization, commodification, popular success and critical praise of new forms; redefining the field of the literary; radical canon erasure or negotiating new paradigms for canonicity; strategies of resistance to canonicity; marginal self-fashioning.

### Suggested bibliography:

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Larsen, Peter Stein. "Nordisme, kanonisering og kvalitetskriterier: Tre vinkler på Nordisk Råds Litteraturpris." *Reception* 78 (2019): 29-39.

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#### **Submission schedule:**

- 400-word abstracts in English or French (Times New Roman 12; single spaced; fully justified) with prospective title, author's full name, affiliation and short bibliography must be sent to: [canon\\_factory@sorbonne-universite.fr](mailto:canon_factory@sorbonne-universite.fr) by January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025. Please send WORD documents only (.docx or .doc)
- Notifications of acceptance after review by the scientific board: January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

- Note that a selection of papers submitted **in English** (even if presented in French at the symposium) will be fully peer-reviewed and published. Contributions will be expected by September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025.

**Confirmed keynote speakers:** Pr. Ulrike Draesner, Universität Leipzig; Pr. Michelle Keown, University of Edinburgh; Pr. Thomas Mohnike, Université de Strasbourg.

**Confirmed artist:** Parisa Akbarzadehpoladi (visual arts; NL).

**Conference organizing board:**

Dr Kim Andringa (Dutch studies; REIGENN); Dr Sylvie Arlaud (German studies; REIGENN); Dr Alessandra Ballotti (Nordic studies; REIGENN); Pr Bernard Banoun (German studies; REIGENN); Dr Jaine Chemmachery (anglophone studies; VALE); Dr Éric Chevrel (German studies; REIGENN); Dr Guillaume Fourcade (anglophone studies; VALE); Arina Giliazova (scientific communication liaison); Dr Jean-François Laplénie (German studies; REIGENN); Dr Benjamine Toussaint (anglophone studies; VALE).

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