MODERN LITERATURE

Session Abstract: “Crossing Boundaries”

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Within the university, the study of literature in modern languages is a relatively recent phenomenon. While classical literature was long a staple of university education, it was not until the late nineteenth century that modern literature became a serious object of study. Shaped by late eighteenth-century romantic theories, which held that the origins and essences of “races” and of “national character” were evident in their languages, the study of modern literature became linked to nationalism. Literature departments were divided along national and linguistic lines, while literary works were seen as expressive of unique “national” characteristics and traditions. Even comparative literary study in modern universities often simply reinforced generalizations about racial or national differences. Nevertheless, the nationalist basis of modern literary study has always operated in tension with, on the one hand, broadly universalist or humanist philosophic strains and, on the other hand, with the nineteenth- and twentieth-century realities of colonialism and imperialism and the mass movement of peoples and ideas across national and linguistic borders. These tensions in modern literary studies - between nationalist and universalist philosophies, and contemporary political and social realities - have become particularly acute in our own era of globalization.

After all, literature crosses boundaries easily: writers and texts respond to and borrow from each other across linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries; stories of migration and exile convey the experience even to those who have always stayed home, experimental texts may cross the borders of genre, and metaphorically, of course, fiction is free to explore realms beyond the real or socially acceptable and thus explore new formations of life and identity. In literature, the creative and progressive aspects of boundary crossing may be celebrated, for it is here that new worlds may be imagined long before they become actual possibilities in the real world. But while literature may cross boundaries, it can also confirm the boundaries of thought and prejudice and thus become complicit with forms of injustice and discrimination. It may also, in complicated ways, cross boundaries creatively only to appropriate and exploit that which lies beyond. At any rate, literature may help us to examine categories, borders, and border crossing outside their usual pragmatic contexts to explore their meanings, possible consequences and complications. Given the complexity of the ways in which literature crosses literal and metaphorical boundaries, contemporary literary scholars seek to reconceptualize both their methodology and object of study.

The four contributors to this panel are thus united in their work by methodologies that strive to move beyond the nation-based disciplinary rubric of traditional literary study without ignoring the specificity of national boundaries and the historical realities that shape them. Both mobilizing and critiquing diverse concepts such as cultural citizenship, diaspora, circulation, and propaganda, these four scholars in different ways provide us with new tools for analyzing how literary texts cross national boundaries. The four contributors are also united in their work by the way they shift our understanding of the object of study-literature - by including in their analyses philosophy, autobiography, film, even blogs, and TXT messaging.