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“Routes rather than roots”:

Writing women’s literary history from a transnational perspective

Women telling nations. / Amelia Sanz, Francesca Scott, Suzan van Dijk. – Amsterdam–New York, NY, 2014. – 472 pp. ISBN: 978-90-420-3870-7; E-book ISBN: 978-94-012-1112-3.

The collection of essays *Women telling nations*, edited by Amelia Sanz, Francesca Scott and Suzan van Dijk, was published in 2014. This is, in fact, the first volume in a book series entitled “Women Writers in History”, which was created at Brill-Rodopi Editions Amsterdam as a result of the COST Action IS0901 “Women Writers in History: Toward a New Understanding of European Literary Culture”.¹ This COST Action aims to “lay the groundwork for a new history of European women’s participation in the literary field of the centuries before 1900” by exploring many important – although often overlooked – questions and problems (“What was these women’s influence? Which active roles did they play as authors and readers in the broadest sense of these words, i.e. including their roles as transcribers, translators, mediators and educators? What happened to them when they fell into the hands of 19th century canonizers? How is their disappearance from literary history to be explained?”),² and further develop the database *WomenWriters*.³ In other words, the project “Women Writers in History” works toward developing a different understanding of literary historiography, from a gender and a transnational perspective. Thus, in some ways, this project represents *a feminist turn* in writing literary history.

A recently launched book series “Women Writers in History” could probably be best described as a platform for publishing – as well as legitimizing – research that has been done and knowledge that has been gained using *WomenWriters* database (and similar digital databases in Europe). Simply put, this book series enables the theoretical and critical interpretation of historical *facts* and *data* entered in a respective database. It should be emphasized that the

¹ More information on COST Action IS0901 available at the website *Women writers’ networks*: http://www.womenwriters.nl/index.php/Book_series

² Cited from: http://www.womenwriters.nl/index.php/COST_Action

³ More information on *WomenWriters* database available at the website: <http://neww.huygens.knaw.nl/>

Editorial Board has invited researchers who are not currently participating in the “Women Writers in History” project to submit proposals for monographs and volumes that could be included into this book series.

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Amelia Sanz and Suzan van Dijk begin their informative introduction to this volume with a common premise that “the nation has been one of the most mobilizing myths of the modern world”.⁴ For meaning of concepts such as nation and nationalism they refer to well-known works by theorists and critics such as Benedict Anderson, E. J. Hobsbawm, Anthony Smith, Anthony Giddens. They, however, immediately remind readers that for a long time literature on nationalism did not take the gender perspective into account. To point out the importance of a close relation between gender and nation, which used to affect – and still affects – women and men differently, Sanz and Van Dijk bring up ideas from works by feminist scholars such as Nira Yuval-Davis, Sylvia Walby, Cynthia H. Enloe. Being aware that national history and literature are among the key elements that form the narrative of a national culture, writers of this introduction emphasize that “history as a discipline has been hardened by the masculinization of history-writing and the exclusion of women and women writers”⁵ from a predominantly male canon. In order to prove that women participated in the literary world before 1900 (despite the widespread idea that their role in this world was marginal until the early 20th century), by exploring different contexts and conditions in which women authors worked, and questioning whether and how they were received by their contemporaries, *Women telling nations* suggests a different understanding of literary history, one which is largely based on ideas and conclusions of scholars like Mario Valdes (“effective literary history”), Franco Moretti (“distant reading”), and Gerda Lerner (“contributory history”).⁶

Women telling nations consists of 23 essays which present twenty countries. The volume is divided into 4 parts, using both temporal and topic criteria. Part one, “Women Belonging to Nations”, explores women’s writing in early modern times and stresses the role of religion. The second part, “Women Writing the Nation”, focuses on the late 19th and early 20th century, which was marked by the processes of nation formation, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. The

⁴ Amelia Sanz and Suzan van Dijk, “Introduction”, *Women telling nations*, 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

third part, “Women in Networks”, pays special attention to women who were involved in “a network of relationships that was not necessarily national or territorial” (biographies, translations and periodical publications have been put forward in this part of the book).⁷ The last part, “Women Looking Elsewhere”, explores the lives and works of women who left their country of origin, on the one side, and the reception of translated literary works among female audiences (e.g. the success of translations of French novels in the mid-19th century Romania), on the other. This volume highlights the idea of *circulation* because, as Sanz and Van Dijk state, “[w]e are interested in routes rather than roots”.⁸ This ostensibly uncomplicated statement is in fact critical of traditionally conceptualized literary histories.

Amelia Sanz and Susan van Dijk explain that bringing together a group of such a diverse authors has implied several challenges in the process of editing this volume: 1) in spite of the fact that all research has been done on a similar historical period, different countries have had different forms of modernity; 2) scholars came from different academic traditions as well as from various theoretical backgrounds which resulted in many different interpretative approaches to the material; 3) level of access to the archives, alongside the existence or lack of digitalized materials, varied among countries and researchers (this probably indicates uneven power relations within European Academia, often described by binary oppositions that imply divide and hierarchy: West-East, center-margin or (semi)periphery etc.). The sole fact that all these challenges have been comprised within this volume shows its complexity and heterogeneity, and demonstrates the range of women’s studies and feminist research in general.

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Finally, what makes *Women telling nations* relevant for someone in the field of humanities or even social sciences in Serbia? The concept of the book is transnational in its nature. Besides articles about women’s writing in France, Italy or Spain, there are articles about women writers and editors from Serbia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Greece and the Ottoman Empire, territories that shared some experiences over the course of history, especially in a period of the formation of national states. For example, Sirmula Alexandridou explores the representations as well as the production of an appropriate (Greek) female identity in periodicals published in Greece in the second half of the 19th century.

⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁸ Ibid., 15.

In “Early Women’s Press (Three Female Magazines): A Challenge for the 19th Century East and Greece” she claims that women’s struggle for education was largely justified by its usefulness in producing caring wives and decent mothers. This article is in an immediate dialogue with one written by Biljana Dojčinović and Ivana Pantelić about early modern women intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th century Serbia – Milica Stojadinović, Draga Dejanović and Milica Tomić – who also used national and patriarchal discourses in their struggle for the right to education for all women, and the right to speak and write about themselves, and for themselves as well.

However, similar problems do not end in the past. In the introduction of an article dedicated to the translations of French novels into the Romanian language in the mid-19th century, Carmen Beatrice Dutu explains that there is still a strong resistance within Romanian academia against women’s and gender studies, and argues that gender ought to be accepted as a valid category of the analysis of Romanian literature. Furthermore, she says that research in literary studies informed by gender studies has been done mainly among doctoral students, which is familiar case to anyone doing feminist research in institutions of higher education in Serbia.

In conclusion, it needs to be said that the project “Knjiženstvo, theory and history of women’s writing in Serbian until 1915” practically arose from the COST Action “Women Writers in History” and has been closely connected to it since. The recently launched book series in the Netherlands has its counterpart in the online journal *Knjiženstvo*, annually published since 2011. The significance of such projects in digital humanities does not end with the fact that new technologies and media enable access to and knowledge about the lives and works of previously marginalized or forgotten women writers (including: women journalists, essayists, scientists etc.); these projects also allow better communication between researchers from different parts of the world, enabling them to share their experiences and knowledge across and beyond national borders and, ideally, produce open knowledge networks.