

“Newspapers and magazines are a treasure trove for the unexpected”



After receiving her PhD in Spanish Studies at the Technische Universität Berlin (Germany), Henriette Partzsch has worked at the Universities of Basle and Geneva (Switzerland). From 2008 – June 2014 she was a Lecturer in Spanish at the University of St Andrews, where she co-designed a new Masters programme in Comparative Literature, while serving as Director of Postgraduate Studies of the School of Modern Languages. In July 2014, she has joined Hispanic Studies at the University of Glasgow. A member of the European COST Action *Women Writers in History: Toward a New Understanding of European Literary Culture*, she has published in recent years on women, press and authorship in the nineteenth-century Spain. She is the project leader of the collaborative research project “Travelling Text 1790-1914: The Transnational Reception of Women’s Writing at the Fringes of Europe (Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain)” (Sept 2013-Aug 2016), funded by Humanities in the European Research Area.

You were born and educated in Germany, with the major interest in Hispanic cultures, which you have been teaching English– first at the University of St. Andrews and, as of recently, at the University of Glasgow. Do you feel like a nomadic subject whose mind is always translating, as Rosi Braidotti famously described the similar situation?

I am not quite sure if I would define myself as a nomadic subject. I am certainly fascinated by connections, transitions and comparisons, and working, living and thinking in different languages on a daily basis makes me probably more aware of what I see as a very basic process of constructing sense.

What made you attracted to Spanish language, Hispanic cultures and women's writing?

When I started to read Romance Literatures and Musicology at the Technische Universität Berlin, I took Spanish as a complete beginner to complement my French, basically because I thought this was a great opportunity to learn something completely new, since I had only very little knowledge of Spanish-language literature and culture. My fate was sealed when my University sent me with the ERASMUS programme to the Universitat Central de Barcelona. I was so fascinated that I did everything to engage as much as possible with all things Spanish, and I have never looked back.

As far as my interest for women's writing is concerned, I became only slowly aware of the gendered nature of our literary system. The decisive moment was the research for my doctoral dissertation on the theme of dawn in the 20th-century Spanish poetry. After reading the complete works of several celebrated poets, I simply had to ask myself why there were so many poems about women, but so few female poets. I am still grateful to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Michael Nerlich, who was sympathetic to (as well as slightly bemused by) my feminist "coming out" and the unforeseen turn my thesis took as a result.

How would you describe the benefits of our COST action focused on women writers in Europe? What was the most important impression from it, or the biggest benefit? Or both?

In my eyes, the importance of the COST Action "Women Writers in History: Toward a New Understanding of European Literary Culture" can hardly be overestimated, simply because it brought together so many researchers working in so many different countries and different languages on very similar questions about women's authorship and the circulation of women's writing. It was very empowering to realize that there are so many of us and that we all share the same objective: finding new ways of telling the history of literature. Furthermore, the COST Action really brought home that collaboration makes a great difference in our work because it places our individual knowledge about some women writers and their text in a much, much broader context. While we were establishing our own network of connections, we started to understand the transnational connectedness of women's writing in history at a completely new level. As a result, the wish for new ways of approaching our shared literary past seems much more feasible, although it will of course take some time and require some important efforts.

You are focused on women's writing and press culture in your research. Can you summarize the importance of periodicals for women's writing and understanding of the cultural aspects of any writing?

The press is an extremely interesting medium because it brings together so many different voices and views, as well as opening little windows onto the emerging consumer culture of the past, for instance through advertisements and illustrations, such as fashion plates. It therefore provides a much more dynamic context for texts than the rather monolithic and more prestigious book, and it was a very efficient vehicle for disseminating content. Newspapers and magazines are a treasure trove for the unexpected, for big and small surprises; for instance, the first Norwegian translation of a Jane Austen novel was serialized in a newspaper. The press provides us with glimpses of ongoing discussions and information about the people who wrote and read the papers. Speaking from a Spanish perspective, more and more women participated actively in periodical publications during the nineteenth century, as writers, directors, as demure "angels of the hearth", but also as campaigners for the abolition of slavery – sometimes on the pages of the same publication. If we only looked at books, we would have very limited insights into the workings of the literary system, and we would certainly miss many names of prolific and well-loved writers, both male and female.

You are the leader of the Traveling Text project, about the women writers on the "fringes" of Europe. What would "fringes" mean in this context?

Carmen Dutu from the *FrinGender* project inspired us to choose the term "fringes" rather than "small countries" or "periphery" for our project. The idea is to provide a different approach to the space of European literary culture, to free the discussion from the more fixed connotations of centre and periphery. We use this term to refer to a rather motley collection of literary cultures that we are studying together, a selection of countries which usually astonishes people when they first come across our project. Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia and Spain have indeed not that much in common: Finland, Norway and Spain are geographically speaking peripheral outposts of Europe, while the Netherlands and Slovenia could be rather described as thoroughfares; the sizes of all five countries and of their population are very different, which means that for the biggest country, Spain, we will only be able to study a tiny part of the literary system concerning the participation of women, whereas the Slovenian team will get very close to capturing all relevant data. Nevertheless, these five entry points are connected through a negative trait: none of them belongs to the imaginary "heart of the Europe of Nations" as it emerged from the Napoleonic Wars, to take up again Mignolo's expression. Our imaginary maps of European literature tend to reflect this hegemony: we have a very well charted centre, which can be customized by adding some of the more 'exotic', 'small' cultures, which appear to be optional and interchangeable in comparison to the unavoidable core. As a result, we are used to studying bi-lateral exchanges, often between individual national literatures and with (parts of) the imaginary heart of Europe, or the circulation of one particular literature in a variety of countries. This approach has of course delivered valuable and interesting results; however, there is the danger of naturalizing this map of European exchanges by ascribing the status of universal norm to the developments at the "heart", and classifying the rest as a more or less fascinating extra – a mechanism very similar to the one that kept women writers at the outskirts of literary history. By entering the literary system from the fringes we are turning the accustomed maps of literary exchanges inside out, moving away from the relatively well-researched routes that establish places as cultural centre, semi-periphery and

periphery. Again, this strategy has a liberating effect because it enables us to search for and map routes and connections that otherwise tend to go unnoticed.

Regarding the recent exhibition in The Hague and the whole TTT project, how would you sum up its results?

We have only just entered the third and final year of the project, which is why I am a bit hesitant to speak about results; having said that, you can find a taster of how we approach the circulation of women's writing following this link: <https://prezi.com/cgmffjtueagi/womens-connections-through-reading-and-writing-in-the-19th-century/> We have now started to write a volume of collected essays, which will summarize our research. However, the experience of the project has already changed the ways in which we work: we will write collaborative chapters that always already include a transnational, comparative perspective, rather than juxtaposing individual chapters with national outlooks. We will discuss sites of the literary system that are important for women's writing, such as libraries, the press, literary criticism, as well as focus on relevant topics and some of the writers that were most widely received during the nineteenth century. We also want to share the approach to literary history that we have developed together, again with the aim of changing the narrative of literary history. In June, we will have a three-day conference at Glasgow Women's Library on Cultural Encounters through Reading and Writing, where we hope to bring together the different strands of the project, and the quantitative as well as qualitative work.

The recent exhibition in The Hague, about nineteenth-century Dutch women writers and their networks, is just one important link in a chain of events that is creating very interesting exchanges between our project team and other people who are equally passionate about literature, as readers, authors, librarians, teachers, feminists, historians. Previously we had very interesting encounters at the Vilenica Festival and the NorskLitteraturfestival Lillehammer. For an academic, it is a great experience to discover how many people are interested in similar questions as we are, and it is very enriching to see what they do with the same material.

You were in Belgrade at the COST workshop in April 2011, the time when Knjiženstvo has just started. Have you followed the development of this project since and if so, what have been your impressions?

I feel very privileged that I was present at the very beginning of *Knjiženstvo*, and I still remember the festive and very special atmosphere during that COST meeting in Belgrade. Of course I have been following the progress of such an exciting project about women's writing, albeit unfortunately from a distance, through Facebook and the English-language contributions in the online journal (I am very grateful for the English abstracts of the articles in Serbian). I am very impressed to see how the group has consolidated, what a wide range of topics it covers, and by its international connectedness.