

Lorenza Starace reviews Subha Xavier's *The Migrant Text. Making and Marketing a Global French literature* (MQUP, 2016).

It is possible to read Subha Xavier's *The Migrant Text* as a salutary contribution to the global turn of French Studies. Across six solid chapters, Xavier promises to lead the reader away from the familiar categories of "littérature migrante", minor and francophone literatures, towards a new conceptualization of "a migrant textual practice" (12). By refusing the constraints of a traditional literary category, this practice defines itself as a mode of writing whose specificity is bound neither to the ethnicity, nor to the nationality of the author.

Far from being merely a coinage replacing another term, the "migrant text" epitomizes Xavier's main theoretical shift from previous attempts to classify migrant artistic production. Xavier finds the old paradigm particularly constricting, for it used to locate any literature produced and distributed outside of nation-state cultural and geographical boundaries as the migrant or postcolonial counterpart of that national literature. By contrast, the migrant text, understood as a "mode", identifies any kind of artwork stemming from the experience of migration: Xavier therefore includes in her corpus works that deliberately exploit this experience in order to enter the world Republic of Letters, be they international bestsellers, as with D. Sijie's *Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse Chinoise*, or smaller publishing cases that managed nonetheless to go beyond their original target readership, as with N. Kattan's *Adieu Babylone*.

The two opening chapters of the book offer a comprehensive account of the controversial, yet flourishing framework of World Literature and of the wide, heterogeneous field of postcolonial and migration studies. Although at times it looks more like a literary review than a critical examination of the field, Xavier's accurate survey will likely be a valuable tool in any class on migrant or postcolonial narratives, precisely because its concision and clarity do not leave aside the historical reach of the concepts examined. The World-literature framework is, for instance, explored in all its historical depth: spanning both the debates in the German and Anglophone areas, Xavier's analysis encompasses Goethe, Auerbach, Marx and Engels, including Damrosch, Moretti, Apter and Walkowitz, conferring her survey a transnational reach rather than a merely Francophone one.

Furthermore, the depth and the scope of her initial survey provide her with a compelling theoretical ground, situating herself within a well-established tradition while simultaneously willing to move further out of its pitfalls. Indeed, what Xavier is highlighting in her examination is not only the obsolescence of Francophone and Postcolonial approaches; she also emphasizes how those approaches, in relation to the increasingly globalized reality of capitalism, fail in adequately accounting for the intertwining of migrants' creative and economic agency in the world literary market. Literary criticism on migration has in fact relied heavily on a Marxist understanding which sees the artwork and the artist as the powerless victims of a market-driven production and consumption mechanism.

Contrary to such an orthodox Marxist frame, Xavier believes that in the contemporary marketplace what she calls the "otherness or foreignness" (14) of migrant authors is always at the intersection of cultural assimilation and resistance. Without falling in the trap of either condemning or hailing the successful positioning of the migrant writers she examines, she highlights the thin line between autonomy and commodification in the creative enterprise and how complex the relation between the laws of the market and the individual agencies of writers might become.

Xavier focuses on seven case studies consisting of recent novels written in French, such as N. Kattan's *Adieu Babylone*, D. LaFerrière's *Comment Faire L'Amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, A. Begag's *Le Gone du Chaaba*. Drawing on Bourdieu's sociological analysis of symbolic capital, her aim is to show how each novel is simultaneously the product of particular literary strategies and the result of specific conditions of production and circulation of the book as a symbolic good in the global publishing industry. These analyses, however, do not include answers to the questions: How are those novels the product of a dialectical negotiation between purely aesthetic and market-driven impulses? How does the migrant text, despite its constitutive migrancy, succeed in uncoupling itself from the nationality or ethnicity of the author?

Indeed, rather than examining the intersection between aesthetics and the market, Xavier disjoins the two spheres, dedicating one chapter to the analysis of the book's publishing history and its performance in the marketplace (copies sold, number of editions, translations) and another one to the literary strategies employed to reach a global audience. Thus, for instance, in the case of Laferrière's novel, *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*, one chapter describes its publishing trend and

marketing strategies and another one deals with its narrative form and stylistic features, ultimately avoiding to concretely take into account the entanglement of aesthetics and production mentioned earlier on.

Similarly, in spite of insisting on migrant texts as works “independent of the ethnic or national origins of any given author” that are “not exclusively the domain of immigrant writers”, it is hard for the reader to recognize the alleged shift from a “literary category” to a “mode” independent of any national or ethnic tie when the works analyzed are novels, mostly conceived within traditional literary genres and forms, consciously capitalizing on the ethnic or immigrant status of the authors.

I find most difficult to understand the author’s call for a “global perspective”. On one hand, Xavier focuses only on works that found critical and commercial success exclusively within French-speaking countries, mainly in France and Quebec. On the other, she takes for granted that the “global” is an inherently positive concept, not considering the ways in which the attempt to reach a transnational audience often inflects the literary and stylistic choices of the text, privileging patterns of translatability and linguistic homogenization over intrinsically literary reasons related to a text’s specificity. By selecting works written for a specifically French readership, and by having a quintessentially French cultural horizon in mind, Xavier implicitly equates the French world with the world itself, making a critical mistake that echoes Pascale Casanova’s identification of Paris as the Greenwich meridian of literature in her examination of the World Republic of Letters. Furthermore, insisting on some migrant authors’ “literary love affair” with French, as in the blatant case of N. Kattan (100-103), Xavier ends up privileging a Franco-centric and voluntaristic reading of migrant texts over an interpretation accounting for political and economic forces influencing the world literary system.

By virtue of its concision and depth, as a literary reader *The Migrant Text* represents a useful tool both for the beginner and the experienced student. As a critical work, however, it falls short of the expectations set by its opening chapters, and by its systematic and confident exploration of the world literature framework. Instead of testing the limits of this approach and trying to overcome them, Xavier circumvents the shortcomings she had promised to address, giving renewed legitimacy to an established literary hierarchy (where French plays a hegemonic role) and to a global model whose complex network of political, economic and aesthetic entanglements remain unsolved.