

Christene D'Anca. Book Review: Sabo, Oana. *The Migrant Canon of Twenty-First-Century France*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. 198 pp.

Migrant literature has garnered a lot of attention among both literary critics and casual readers over the last thirty years. As more critics explore migration narratives their endeavors are forging the necessary tools for understanding the nuances of these works, and the ways in which those who have been displaced, or chose to leave their native lands, have navigated foreign environments. As more laypersons enjoy this genre its soaring popularity becomes translated into financial gain and fame for the authors and all the parties responsible for propelling it into the public eye. In Oana Sabo's *The Migrant Canon in Twenty-First-Century France*, she begins by situating the genre within a global context, before scaling back to explore the specifics of her topic, and through a series of questions she positions her work within the field. She then ends her work by revealing her broad awareness of how the migration novel has been viewed and consumed over the last thirty years to better reinforce her own argument that the mechanisms in place to support novels have remained the same.

Production houses are perhaps the most influential as they decide whether an author's work will enter the literary realm. The power to make this decision comes with an equal amount of prestige – publishing houses are in the position of deciding the literary merit of a work, and by accepting a work they place their stamp of approval upon it, deeming it worthy for consumption. Sabo argues that these sacred institutions have become profane in that their prerogatives have shifted towards a commodification of books, wielding their power to create objects of mass consumption, with less of a focus on literary merit. She then outlines the systematic approach publishing companies have taken to remove the stigma associated with popular paperback books. By releasing classics and other works of high literary value in the cheaper and more accessible format of the paperback, they have managed to conflate the distinction between literary and economic merit; even though paperbacks have lower price points, they make up for it by selling in significantly higher volumes, and have thus become the currency of the literary exchange. Since migrant narratives are in vogue, many publishing houses have pursued them either as side publications that earn audience appeal due to their exotic nature, or they incorporate the genre into their mainstream publications as they have over time earned their place within French literary culture.

This marketability, Sabo asserts, also creates confined spaces for the authors. While migrant literature has become an acceptable, and even popular genre in France, it also has built in parameters that restrict authors in the kinds of migrant pieces they can produce. Just like the earlier *Beur* genre that became lucrative for a select few who figured out how to cater to public expectations, so too does today's migrant narrative need to adhere to scripted storylines and "thematic tropes" played out by typecast characters. This stereotyping is not immediately apparent, but exists within the paratextual presentation of the book, such as the description on the back cover, the cover image, or the title of the work. Everything works to highlight the anguished, distraught, even desperate voice of the migrant seeking refuge and a better life. In other words, people become subconsciously drawn to the genre due to its otherness that is subtly exhibited by the book's appearance.

Nevertheless, the lingering question that remains to be answered is why? Sabo provides the answer in the form of a case study: Henri Lopes' *Une Enfant de Poto-Poto (A Girl from Poto-Poto)*, where the hybridity of the characters takes over the main plot, rendering them as simultaneously plural, yet African, attempting to fit into a Francophile culture. Their personal

struggles become intertwined into the large political milieu, thrusting the exoticness of their situations into the foreground of the novel. Even as the stories take place abroad, they fit into the image and ideal of an ethnically diverse France. They offer a fictional window into the lives of disenfranchised people across the world, and make the audience members, regardless of race, more in-tune with the perceived global issues at hand. Sabo continues her chapter with similar cases, arguing that the connecting factor between these works and their acclaim in the market itself, and the techniques used by the press agents and editors within publishing houses to thrust these works into the public eye. However, the ways in which the public receives their efforts remain to be seen, which the following chapter of Sabo's book addresses.

While readership of the migrant novel has been steadily increasing since the twentieth century, with the emergence of online book forums and venues available for academics and non-academics alike, readers can now offer myriad types of reviews for works they have read. Online review milieus have gained so much prominence that they have been taken into consideration in the development of new literary awards. Publishing houses, such as Gallimard have partnered with sites like Babelio, to create book prizes for the most popular books. While these sites, unlike Amazon, for example, are nonprofit, and do not sell the books they review, they do participate in the commercial aspect of sales by either linking booksellers to the books, or suggesting gifts based on the reviews a book receives and the types of audience members who reviewed it. Consequently, they drive up sales, and have thus acquired the attention of booksellers, essentially feeding into the cycle of consecration and consumption.

After detailing the process of online review sites along with the role of each contributor from the publisher to the bookseller, to the reviewer/consumer, Sabo offers two case studies to elucidate how this process functions in regard to migration narratives. Her first example is Milan Kundera's *L'Ignorance* that follows two Czech émigrés through France and Denmark over a twenty-year span before returning to their homeland. Each adventure is measured in terms of its narrative value that the couple relishes to retell once they reunite with their friends and family. Unfortunately, upon return, they find that others are not interested in their stories, nor care about their time abroad. The couple is so seamlessly reintegrated into their previous lives that they feel the last twenty years had been erased. However, when looking at the way Kundera has been received by the online review community, it immediately becomes apparent that there are more elements taken into account than just the story itself.

Many of the reviews came from readers who had already been familiar with Kundera's previous works, and came to the book with preconceived notions. Notably, this was the first novel Kundera wrote in French, and while Sabo, along with most others, understands the need to shift from Czech into a larger world language, the transition was not always well received. Secondly, Kundera's status as a Czech émigré living in France impacted the way some readers attempted to read into the Czech-French connection portrayed in *Ignorance*. Even for those readers who had no previous knowledge about Kundera, or his work, the migration narrative genre lends itself to a series of presuppositions. Travel, exile, immigration, adventure, and homecoming are loaded concepts about which almost everyone has some deep-seated idea. The ways in which the novel met these expectations, or not, was often remarked in the comments and played an important role in deciding whether the novel was deemed a success. Sabo notes that this creates a tension between the novel's aesthetic and commercial value – it is produced for mass consumption, but also feels as if it has a specific, perhaps elite readership in mind. This same tension is present in Sabo's second case study, *La Vie d'un homme inconnu* (*The Life of an Unknown Man*), by Andrei Makine.

The Russian homecoming for Makine's main character is just as bleak as for Kundera's Czech couple. However, Makine, far from aligning with this fellow migration narrative authors, criticizes them for having sold out to mass appeal over maintaining literary integrity. Thus, he sets out to create a novel that counteracts the newly forged relationship between the market and the literary sphere. Nevertheless, in doing so, he negates to take into consideration the multiple similarities between himself and others, like Kundera, their almost identical trajectories towards fame, and their oeuvres. The public, however, did not fail to take any of these facets into consideration, as demonstrated by the types of reviews Makine has received for *La Vie d'un homme inconnu*. Yet, when it came to the migration narrative genre, the discussion turned from content to form, and the predominant method for reviewing the novel's place within the larger framework was less concerned with the narrative, than with the novel's odd structure. Sabo astutely regards this as a shift towards a new type of online reviewer – a hybrid between the lay and professional reader. These reviews attempt to make sense of the complicated aspects of the novel with awareness of its strategies. They are informed reviewers who peruse professional review sites, read book jackets, and pay attention to what their fellow readers have to say. Even though Makine bristles at this type of mass consumer attention, by accepting interviews and joining other migrant novel writers on panels, he reluctantly acquiesces to their existence. Regardless of how he may feel about the marketplace's emerging role in literary production, through these case studies Sabo underscores how its importance can no longer be ignored. In the following chapter she looks at the lay reader in conjunction with another agent in literary production – the literary prize.

With the growth of migrant literature, it was only a matter of time before it began to be considered for literary prizes, and more notably had a prize created for its sake. In 2010 the *Prix littéraire de la Porte Dorée* (Golden Door Literary Prize) was created as a means of celebrating not only migrant authors and their texts, but also the migration narrative genre as a whole. Sabo asserts that the prize essentially marries politics and pleasure by focusing on a genre that is political in nature, but doing so in a manner that simultaneously legitimizes it publicly. In other words, a national institute – the National Museum of the History of Immigration – has now consecrated a genre that has garnered popular appeal. Like the aforementioned initiative between Gallimard and Babelio, the *Porte Dorée* relies on readers, formed into a committee, to choose the books eligible for the prize. The committee is comprised of scholars associated with the National Museum, but also lay readers, all of who are sent dozens of books to read and rank. Eight to ten of these books are then nominated for the prize. The jury, composed of another eclectic combination of readers, from academic professionals, to politicians, publishers, and even high school students, selects the winner. Thus, the process is a mixture of professional selection and popular tastes. Yet, it must be noted that caveats are in place to maintain the literariness and aesthetic values of the prize and the texts considered. These measures hold the prize to a certain standard among the many others in France and ensure that the pieces selected have merit that extends beyond both trendiness and academia.

The prize winner along with the other contending authors are additionally cast into public settings through the numerous events sponsored by the National Museum, such as book readings, question forums, and meet and greet functions throughout the year. While this can be lucrative, many of these events also come with restrictions, and can have the effect of typecasting a writer into a single genre, which can further restrict their future careers. However, this is not unique to the *Porte Dorée*, as prizes in general typically “function as branding devices.”

The *Porte Dorée* also functions as an equalizer between other denominations, such as publishing houses, where both large and small stand to gain prominence. The explicit promise of publicity earned from the prize is sufficient for most to look past the shortcomings and unfavorable outcomes to the potential windfall of readership and overall notoriety. Authors, too, understand the significance of this prize, and look towards it as a means of advancement, even it means catering to only a certain audience and genre going forward. Those with no agendas to diversify their writing view the *Porte Dorée* as an opportunity, a foothold, into an industry that has until recently remained tightly monitored.

Culturally, the *Porte Dorée* makes apparent how the always already present globalized aspect of France has been reimagined into many newer texts. However, even as these newer texts can be lighter and easier to read, appealing to the emerging generations of people who actually live among others from different backgrounds, there is still a very thin line between celebrating multiculturalism and perpetuating the cycle of exotification. Further, the National Museum, which oversees the prize and its recipients, along with recording historical instances of immigration in France in general, has often come under scrutiny for homogenizing the process. By displaying immigration chronologically, distinct nationalities and individuals become clumped together. European immigration becomes conflated with postcolonial migration. Immigrants' disparate motivations and impetuses are erased, and then reproduced en masse across numerous exhibits.

Nevertheless, as the *Porte Dorée* focuses exclusively on literatures produced in the French languages, it positions French as the national language of migration, and recentralizes France within the global context of immigration. In this sense it reduces the tension between the nation's colonial past and multicultural present. By broadcasting the multiple authors and texts that have been produced using the French language to communicate migration narratives, the prize establishes the ways in which the French culture overall has been enriched by these works. In absorbing the many voices of migration it harkens back to France's eighteenth century history as a country of universal human rights, as opposed to a country that participated in colonialism. Additionally, with a focus on literature, the *Porte Dorée* circumvents political controversy while partaking in political discourse. In short, it mediates the multiple facets of immigration in an undeniably diplomatic fashion. Accordingly, in the next chapter, Sabo turns to the Académie française, which she argues functions in a similar way to promote nationality through its various annual literary prizes and exclusive membership that consecrate the French language and its literature, even when that literature is produced by immigrants.

The fourth and final chapter of *The Migrant Canon* focuses on Dany Laferrière, and his association with the Académie française. Cardinal Richelieu founded the Académie in 1635 under the rule of Louis XIII, with the institution's main scope to define and make uniform the French language. Since its founding, it has acted as the ultimate authority on the language and its grammar, with a purview on maintaining the language's purity. It nationalizes portmanteaus and constantly attempts to cleanse the language of any perceived threats to its homogeneity. Membership has traditionally been granted to those with French nationality, living in France, and practicing Francophilia in their writing. Even when it has recruited non-French-born authors, those criteria were maintained. Laferrière defies all of these parameters. Even as he understands France's power to legitimize French language writing, he has crafted himself as a transnational author with multiple roots who does not buy into the ideology of a centralized France. His appointment to the Académie was a landmark in its history and has helped shape its new course. The remainder of the chapter traces Laferrière's trajectory to fame, and helps explain the

seemingly paradoxical relationship between an institution that focuses on preserving nationality and a man who constantly elides it.

His career took off with his provocatively titled first novel, *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègro sans se fatiguer* (*How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*), first published in Quebec in 1987. The novel received immediate attention for more than its explicit treatment of sex, or even its interracial aspect. It relied on purposely-exotic characters and tropes to overturn racial stereotypes. It concurrently appealed to mass audiences through its sentimentality and easy to read format, while also drawing in critics through its clever use of language and rhetorical devices. The multi-layered text, coupled with Laferrière's staunch penchant for self-promotion earned the book a top place on the best seller's list, along with a place in the literary limelight. With the occasion of the book's notoriety he obtained an opportunity to create his persona as an author and this was the beginning of his assertion of a global individual, belonging to no one nation or language. He simply chose to describe himself as an author, insisting on "writer" as the only descriptor that should be attributed to him in regard to his work.

Laferrière continues to question the value of literary production when it is hampered by the demands of association – to genre, nationality, language, or any other emblematic entity. In 2008 he produced *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (*I am a Japanese Writer*) that critiques the pressures placed on authors to continuously produce works for mass consumption at the expense of literary merit. As the international market became ecstatic at the prospect of his novel, they were also forced to consider: what is a Japanese writer? How can a man, quite clearly not Japanese, broach this topic? In creating these questions, Laferrière plays with the fragility of identity that is based on origin, nationality, and language. It also adds to the characterization he had earlier created for himself of a writer. Much like his narrator at the end of the novel, he is a writer, and nothing more. The narrator's failure to produce as a writer essentially erases his identity, in much the same way Laferrière would cease to exist in the public eye if he did not constantly promote himself and produce work.

This insistence upon the solidity of his identity as an author above all other identifiers is carried over to the last book Sabo discusses, *L'Énigme du retour* (translated as simply *The Return*). The highly autobiographical novel follows the narrator, Dany, in his return to Haiti after living in North America for the past thirty-three years. Throughout his journey the author-narrator feels the remoteness of the land, and focuses on his inability to belong. His only connection surfaces through his visit to a bookstore where he sees customers perusing his novels that have made their way around the world. He realizes in that moment that he has the ability to connect with various people through his writing. He may not consider himself Haitian any more than he considers himself American, Canadian, or French, but his authorship serves as his passport and his credential. Tellingly however, this, like Laferrière's other novels, is written in French, which is the only other constant throughout his oeuvre. It is also the defining factor for his admittance into the Académie française. He may view himself as a universal author, appealing to lay readers around the world, but throughout his career he has essentially consecrated the French language on a global level. Even as he awaited the news of his acceptance as a member to the Académie in Port-au-Prince as opposed to Paris, clearly aligning himself with his national origin, he would be remembered as and considered a French author.

Nevertheless, Sabo explores the multiple contradictions between Laferrière's self-proclaimed identity and contestation of Francophonie with his appointment to the Académie that strives for the insurance of this very practice. It is just as easy to see his appointment as a move on the Académie's part towards a more accepting view of global literatures to enrich the French culture

and language as it is to view it as a means of asserting the French language's dominance in the global literary field. Similarly, Laferrière's acceptance bears the double-sided argument in favor of a man moving to change the institution from within as much as he could be accused of selling out his long-held principles in favor of literary acclaim. Yet, in a beautifully orchestrated series of arguments in favor of or against any of these perspectives, Sabo explains how Laferrière's appointment benefits both parties. As he worked his Haitian origin into his acceptance speech, insisted that his academician sword be crafted by a Haitian sculpture, and his green robe be sewn by a Quebecoise designer, Laferrière accepted the most prestigious role for authors in France. By tracing Laferrière's triangulated route to success, Sabo asserts that regardless of the path one takes in the literary field, it is propped up by "myriad players and contextual factors."

In her following section Sabo sums up the importance of the works she has examined in that they have all helped carve out a space in the literary field for the genre of the migration narrative. Additionally, she concludes that these texts would not have realized their current fame without the aid of publishing house, editors, literary prizes, and national endowments. However, they have reaped this help through their concern with multiple facets of literature, from their literary aesthetics to their political messages and commercial values. They engage with both lay and professional readers and thus bridge the gap towards national acclaim. Lastly, they mark the changes within French society as it grapples with the ever-growing globalization and multicultural framework within its borders. *The Migrant Canon in Twenty-First-Century France* traces the path of French migration literature through a series of detailed chapters that explore how it is produced and consumed. Sabo interrupts her rhetoric at multiple points in her work in order to elucidate the processes undergone at every step of consecration. She summarizes the methods and procedures of various institutions and explains their roles within the literary field. The end result is a well-documented history and legitimation of migration narratives, from their onslaught in the 1980s into the modern era. As everything has changed, Sabo demonstrates how it has also remained very much the same.