

2015-16 Report on ICLA Research Committee on Literature and Neuroscience,

Chair, Suzanne Nalbantian, July 6, 2016

Submitted by Suzanne Nalbantian for the ICLA Executive Council Meeting, July 19-20, 2016, Vienna, Austria

Committee Members (additional members are invited annually according to changing topics):

From Comparative Literature:

Donald Wehrs, Auburn University, Alabama; Peter Schneck, Osnabrück University, Germany; John Burt Foster, George Mason University, Washington D.C.; Suzanne Nalbantian, Long Island University, New York

From Neuroscience:

Jean-Pierre Changeux, Kavli Institute (USCD) and Pasteur Institute (Paris); Paul M. Matthews, Imperial College, London; Robert Stickgold, Harvard University, USA

The ICLA Research Committee on Literature and Neuroscience has been involved this year with two projects that further the ongoing dialogue between the field of comparative literature and neuroscience. This venue has included the organization of a Group Section on Cultural Memory for this ICLA Congress in Vienna 2016 and the creation of an interdisciplinary volume on creativity for Oxford University Press, edited by Suzanne Nalbantian and neuroscientist Paul Matthews. This volume in progress grew out of a symposium Nalbantian directed at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in the fall of 2014, with several members of the ICLA Committee giving papers there. With these two projects this year, this research committee has maintained its ongoing dialogue between comparatists and neuroscientists, yielding concrete and productive interdisciplinary research.

As Chair, Nalbantian has introduced a new area of inquiry for our committee-- that of cultural memory, which is the topic for a Group Section (#17691) of sessions at this 2016 ICLA Vienna Congress and especially germane to the site of this Congress. The committee's current work and this Group Section, in particular, has special relevance for the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme at the

Congress, which is asking the question of how Comparative Literature can cooperate with the UNESCO project. There are nine speakers on the program for our Group Section on cultural memory, including Peter Hanenberg (one of our hosts at the Catholic University of Portugal for last year's ICLA meeting), Sirkka Knuuttila from the University of Helsinki, Astrid Erll from the Goethe University of Frankfurt and Donald Wehrs (a permanent member of the committee). It is interesting to recall that the topic of cultural memory was taken up by the ICLA some nineteen years ago at the 1997 Leiden Congress of the ICLA. However, in those days, neuroscience was not in the picture and thus was not included in that Congress' section on "Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory." In the new context of this research committee, as we revisit this topic, recent research in cultural neuroscience is shown to shed significant light on an interdisciplinary understanding of the creation, retention or reformulation of cultural memory. Having treated the mechanisms of individual consciousness at a previous ICLA Congress, we are now turning to the study of collective memory, as produced by culture and history. Two new neuroscientists are brought into this group to present the epigenetic impact on collective memory and the possibility of its inheritance, as corroborated by the literary studies of several of our comparatists. The sessions treat the following topics : 1) Formations and Re-formations of Cultural Memory; 2) Epigenetics vs. Genetics of Cultural Memory; 3) Documentation of Cultural Memory in History and Journalism. In particular, the ongoing subject of one of the 1997 Leiden sessions, "Colonizer and Colonized," is reconsidered in this 2016 Vienna session with respect to the reshaping of cultural memory in light of the scientific understanding of trauma. A historical approach will also be presented to consider how specific nations or groups are influenced by their specific vantage points, raising the question of the objectivity of collective memory. A goal of this interdisciplinary work is to explore gene/culture coevolution in the formation of cultural memory, a topic which is in its infancy in the field

of science and which is intriguing for comparatists to view through the literary lens. Another edited volume may well arise from this collaborative inquiry.