



International Conference

Writing Meritocracy: Figurations of a Concept Across Literary History and Contexts of Literary Production

Vrije Universiteit Brussels, 18-20 September 2025

Although initially gaining traction through Michael Young's scathing political satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), the term 'meritocracy', as well as the concept behind it, rapidly became part and parcel of the 'ideas we live by' across the globe (Littler 2017). Today, both the paradigm and its concrete application in a variety of social contexts have once more become targets of criticism, and yet they continue to shape social environments and cultural narratives in myriad ways. Whilst research into meritocratic thought and culture has had great currency across disciplines in the past decades – including, more recently, the humanities – a number of limitations can be observed in existing approaches: Firstly, the bulk of scholarly engagements treat meritocratic thought as a current, or recent, phenomenon. Notably, already Young saw meritocratic narratives operating prior to the industrial revolution (Young 1958), and Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that they are traceable back at least to European antiquity (Appiah 2018). However, historical perspectives that would enable us to explore the longue-durée continuities of such narratives remain rare. Secondly, concepts such as "every man forges his own fortune" – perhaps the most potent meritocratic myth of all – have travelled widely; not only across time but also across cultural, geographical and linguistic contexts, often encountering pre-existing local variants or counternarratives. There remains a significant lacuna in tracing 'meritocratic' narratives beyond Western contexts, and in a variety of transcultural contact zones. Thirdly, among the body of research emerging from the humanities, contributions from the field of literary studies have remained scarce (e.g. Robbins 2007). This is surprising when considering the manifold reciprocal relationships between literature on the one hand, and cultural narratives on the other. Literary studies – with their inter-disciplinary components of literary history, formal analysis, and their translational engagement with the world – arguably provide an ideal tool for an exploration of meritocratic narratives that operate as latent hegemonic forms.

This conference seeks to contribute to the field of meritocracy studies from a literary perspective. We propose to explore "how literature participates" – over time and in a variety of contexts across the globe – in the construction, circulation and critique of meritocratic thought (Cheah 2017). By assembling case studies that focus on a range of periods and literary traditions across the linguistic spectrum, we seek to approach meritocratic narratives through the lens of literature, and as a world-literary phenomenon. In order to better understand the reciprocal relations between meritocratic narratives and literary forms, we invite contributions that engage with meritocratic narratives as a theme, and formation, in literary works as well as contributions that investigate the impact of meritocratic narratives on the production and reception of literary works in a given context.

We accept proposals of papers offering close readings as well as overviews of a genre, period or specific context. While not excluding the current, contemporary situation and US/UK contexts, which are already receiving considerable attention, we are especially interested in proposals that consider the shapes meritocratic narratives have previously assumed and expand the debate across linguistic and cultural contexts. To allow for a focused exchange on meritocratic narratives as literary acts of worldmaking, we further delimit the selection of proposed examples to genres that involve writing as an integral practice/medium.

How are narratives of achievement framed in plays, narrative and poetic texts? How are they shaped in specific ways *as forms*, e.g. with regard to character typologies, semantic fields, plot structures and other compositional elements? Which narratives of achievement, progress and entitlement are especially dominant in a given literary work, genre or context? How is a spectrum of such narratives presented and negotiated in and through literature? What is the role of literature in the perpetuation of meritocratic paradigms? And what of the position and role of individual authors (across the spectrum of gender, provenance, social strata) in projecting and enabling such paradigms? To what extent is literature as a cultural practice itself subjected to, and co-opted by meritocratic frameworks? Can it exist outside meritocratic frameworks? Can literature provide a space for unmasking and resisting problematically hegemonic concepts of valorisation? We look forward to receiving proposals that engage with these and related questions.

Deadline for applications:

15 March 2025

How to apply?

Please submit your abstracts and a biographical note via this [form](#). Selected participants will be notified by 30 March 2025.

Travel and accommodation costs:

Travel and accommodation costs for selected participants will be covered.

Organisers:

Eva Ulrike Pirker, Suzanne Scafe and Maria Pace Aquilina (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Contact us:

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References:

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Cheah, Pheng. "Worlding Literature: Living with Tiger Spirits." *Diacritics* 45.2 (2017): 86-114.
Littler, Jo. *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. New York: Routledge, 2017.
Robbins, Bruce. *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.
Young, Michael. *The Rise of the Meritocracy: 1870-2033; An Essay on Education and Equality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958.

