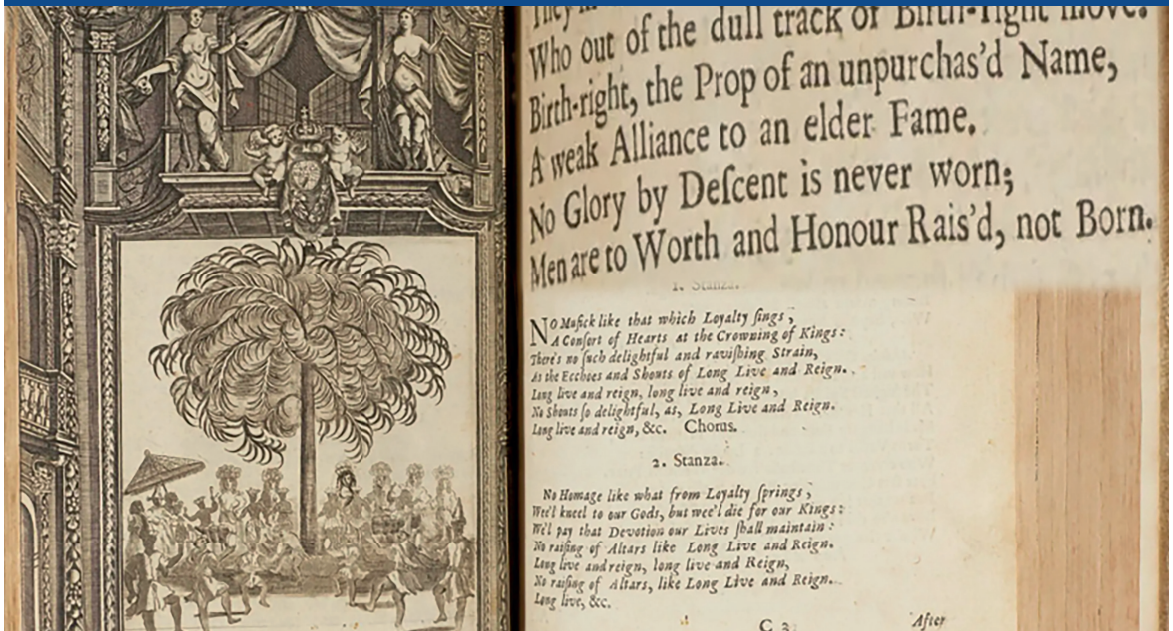


WRITING MERITOCRACY

FIGURATIONS OF A CONCEPT ACROSS LITERARY HISTORY AND CONTEXTS OF LITERARY PRODUCTION

18-20 SEPTEMBER 2025



CENTRE FOR LITERARY &
INTERMEDIAL CROSSINGS
RESEARCH GROUP



TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONFERENCE THEME	4
PROGRAMME OVERVIEW	5
KEYNOTE LECTURES	8
LITERARY / ARTISTIC PROGRAMME	10
ABSTRACTS & SPEAKERS	12
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	32



CONFERENCE THEME

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 at least back 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. Meritocratic narratives through the lens of literature, and as a world-literary phenomenon.

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.

References:

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*. New York: Liveright, 2018. 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 Meritocracy: 1870-2033; An Essay on Education and Equality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958.

PROGRAMME

**VENUE: LEARNING THEATRE AT THE LIC
(VUB/ULB CAMPUS ETTERBEEK)**

DAY 1: THURSDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2025

9:30 - 10:00

Registration & Coffee

10:00 - 10:30

Opening / Welcome

10:30 - 12:00

PANEL 1: RANK & GENDER IN THE EARLY MODERN AGE

Chair: Klaas Van Gelder

Xiao Wang

Debating the Source of Gentlemanly Honour in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Cressida*

Paul Arblaster

"Raised to Offices and Dignities by their Lawful Lord": Recognition of Merit in the Journalistic Rhetoric of Early Seventeenth-Century Antwerp

Andrew Hiscock

"All sprang but from one woman and one man, Then how doth Gentry come to rise and fall?": Aemilia Lanyer and the Textual Politics of Recognition in Jacobean England

12:00 - 13:30

Lunch at the Campus Restaurant

13:30 - 14:30

KEYNOTE: CATHY SHRANK

"The Making of New Gentlemen": Social Mobility and Ambivalence in Early Modern England

Chair: Maria Pace Aquilina

14:30-14:45

Coffee refill

14:45-15:45

PANEL 2: INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND THE COMMON GOOD: MOVING IN(TO) MODERN PARADIGMS

Chair: Maxime Louise Honinx

Thomas Rommel

"...the Best of all Improvers": Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* as a Narrative on Meritocratic Entitlement

Carolyn Gebauer

Writing against Male Narratives of (Social) Mobility: Feminist Voices from Wollstonecraft to Woolf

15:45-16:00

Coffee refill

16:00-17:30

PANEL 3: BEYOND EUROPE: THRESHOLDS TO THE GLOBAL MODERN

Chair: Tola Oshitelu

Ehsan Zivaralam

From Stage to State: The Role of Early Iranian Playwriting in Shaping Meritocracy

Kingsley Brempong Ohene Adu

Indigenous Meritocracies and Colonial Hierarchies: Rethinking Social Mobility in Casely-Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* and Sekyi's *The Anglo-Fanti*

Ekaterina Morozova

Inventing the Poet: Mayakovsky, Intermediality, and the Meritocratic Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde

Break

19:30

Conference Dinner at Restaurant François, Quai aux Briques 2, 1000 Bruxelles.

DAY 2: FRIDAY, 19 SEPTEMBER 2025

10:00 - 10:30

Coffee

10:30 - 12:00

PANEL 4: BETWEEN/WITHIN/BEYOND THE COLONIAL LOGIC OF MERIT

Chair: Josephine Delali Ofei

Nina Aidam

Meritocracy and Cultural Disruption in Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *The River Between*

Asante Lucy Mtenje

"Sikusinja's Success deserves all the Praise?!": Examining the Myth of Meritocracy in J.W. Gwendwe's *Sikusinja ndi Gwenembe*

Angelique Golding

From ATCAL to Wasafiri: Challenging Meritocratic Narratives in British Education and Literature

12:00-13:30

Lunch at the Campus Restaurant

13:30-14:30

KEYNOTE: MADHU KRISHNAN

Meritocracy and the Asymmetry of Literary Capital: "Independent" Publishing and African Writing in the "World Republic of Letters"

Chair: Suzanne Scafe

14:30-14:45

Coffee refill

14:45-15:45

PANEL 5: RESISTING DOMINANT PARADIGMS

Chair: Mehran Ghandi

Aida Banakar

Staging Meritocracy: Gender, Power, and Resistance in Bahram Beyzaei's Theater

Samantha Wharton

Black Women Writing against the Grain: Migration, Subjectivity, and Literary Recognition

Break

18:30

Reception

Wisukama Art Shop (Matonge)

Dady Mbumba (CAUSE)

Rumba and Congolese Art: Meritocratic (Counter-)Imaginations

Meritocracy in Congolese imaginations and the diaspora: a small journey through the notes of rumba, art, exile and colonization

DAY 3: SATURDAY, 20 SEPTEMBER 2025

10:00-10:30

Coffee

10:30-12:00

**PANEL 6: PATHWAYS THROUGH
MERITOCRACY: CONFORMING,
RESISTING, SURPASSING NORMS?**

Chair: Ceydanur Temurok

Marie Rose Arong

Collaboration and Complicity as Pathways
to Merit in Anglophone Filipino Novels

Yiyi He

Confessions of a Model Minority:
Meritocratic Complicity and Resistance
in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*
(2015)

Uhuru Phalafala

Political and Spiritual Dimensions of Play
in 21st Century Black Feminist Poetry

12:00-13:30

Lunch at the LIC

13:30-15:00

**PANEL 7: UP OR OUT: MERITOCRACY
AS A SPACE OF OPPORTUNITY OR
CULTURAL TRAP**

Chair: Cedric Van Dijck

Sabine Hillen

Le Mérite et les Passions Tristes: Edouard
Louis's Engagement with Meritocratic
Ideas

Iga Nowicz

Derailing Meritocracy: *Ein schönes
Ausländerkind* by Toxische Pommes (2024)

Michaela Oberwinkler

Meritocracy, AI, and the Ethics of Creation:
Rethinking the Power of Language in Rie
Qudan's *Sympathy Tower Tokyo* (2024)

15:00-15:30

Coffee refill

15.30 - 16.30

**READING AND CONVERSATION:
ALECIA MCKENZIE**

The Question of Work: Literary and Artistic
Navigations

Chair: Eva Ulrike Pirker

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

CATHY SHRANK (UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD)

“The Making of New Gentlemen”: Social Mobility and Ambivalence in Early Modern England

This talk will explore the complex and often ambivalent attitudes toward meritocracy in the early modern period. While the sixteenth century offers numerous examples of statesmen and writers who rose to prominence despite non-elite or modest social origins – demonstrating the period’s recognition of personal talent and ability as pathways to advancement – such figures were frequently met with scepticism or even outright suspicion. This ambivalence is further reflected in contemporary debates surrounding the nature of gentleness or nobility: whether it was an inherited status grounded in birth and lineage, or a quality that could be cultivated through virtuous behaviour and education. Notably, even authors who themselves achieved success through merit rather than aristocratic privilege often expressed unease with the figure of the “self-made man,” revealing the tensions between traditional hierarchies and emerging ideals of social mobility.



Cathy Shrank is Professor of Tudor and Renaissance Literature at the University of Sheffield. Publications include *Writing the Nation in Reformation England* (Oxford University Press, 2004); *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature*, co-edited with Mike Pincombe (Oxford University Press, 2009); an edition of Shakespeare’s *Poems*, co-edited with Raphael Lyne (Longman Annotated English Poets, 2017); and *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas More’s Utopia*, co-edited with Phil Withington (Oxford University Press, 2023). She is one of the editors of *The Oxford Works of Thomas Nashe* and has recently completed a monograph on late medieval and early modern dialogue for Oxford University Press.

MADHU KRISHNAN
(UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL)
**Meritocracy and the Asymmetry
of Literary Capital: “Independent”
Publishing and African Writing in the
“World Republic of Letters”**



This paper examines how the material infrastructures that underpin global publishing practices fundamentally undermine the ideal of meritocracy.

It is now widely acknowledged that entry into the so-called “republic of letters” is largely contingent upon adherence to established aesthetic and discursive norms shaped by dominant publishing centres – most notably Paris, New York, and London – and mediated through the dynamics of symbolic capital, positionality, and gatekeeping within the field of cultural production. In other words, asymmetrical flows of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital have produced a literary economy that privileges the Global North and valorises forms of literary expression tailored to its markets and imagined readerships.

However, such critiques risk overlooking the nuanced ways in which these same capital flows – often circuitous and uneven – also enable the emergence of alternative modes of writing, publishing, and readerships, even as they simultaneously obscure them. Through an analysis of so-called “independent” African writing and publishing, Madhu Krishnan interrogates the limits of meritocratic discourse within this context, showing how structural inequities persist despite efforts by individuals and collectives to assert agency within the system. In doing so, she also addresses the complex and frequently reductive narratives surrounding the role of institutions, funding mechanisms, and transnational partnerships in shaping the field of African literatures today.

Madhu Krishnan is Professor of African, World and Comparative Literatures at the University of Bristol. She is author of three monographs on contemporary literatures and leads a project funded by the European Research Council on the contours of literary activism on the African continent.

LITERARY / ARTISTIC SPEAKERS

ART TALK BY DADY MBUMBA

Rumba and Congolese Art: Meritocratic (Counter-)Imaginations

A small journey through the notes of rumba, art, exile and colonisation: this art talk highlights how meritocracy is perceived in Congolese imaginations, particularly in the diaspora.

Dady Mbumba is the coordinator of CAUSE, an organisation dedicated to art, education, and culture. He holds degrees in Law and Political Science (UCL), International Relations and Project Management (ULB), and Development and International Cooperation (ULg).

Beyond his academic background, he is a speaker and African storyteller, committed to using narrative as a tool for empowerment and cultural transmission. His main areas of interest include Africa, history, geopolitics, philosophy, and the transmission of memory.

Through his multiple roles, Dady Mbumba works at the intersection of knowledge, culture, and advocacy, contributing to a more inclusive and conscious society.



READING AND CONVERSATION WITH WRITER ALECIA MCKENZIE

The Question of Work: Literary and Artistic Navigations



A woman with a future in finance and an office with a vista of the Brooklyn skyline drops her career to become a gardener. A prospective basketball star turns his back on the path envisioned for him to follow a vocation as an artist. An 'illegal migrant worker' in charge of the dust, dinner and the dog at an address on Brussels' affluent Avenue Louise finds value in pragmatism. Imagining and juxtaposing a great variety of roads taken – some by choice, others by circumstance – Alecia McKenzie interrogates concepts of work and explores different kinds of valorisation in relation to work. Her novels and stories display and dissect meritocratic ideals by exposing hierarchies that privilege certain kinds of work while undervaluing others. At the same time, she affirms the significance of art and literature as vital cultural work and psychic process, positioning artistic labour as profound and necessary contribution to human and social life. Alecia McKenzie will read excerpts from a selection of works and engage in a moderated conversation with the conference participants.

Alecia McKenzie is a Jamaican writer, editor and painter currently based between France and Belgium. Her first collection of short stories (*Satellite City*) and her debut novel (*Sweetheart*) have both won Commonwealth literary prizes. *Sweetheart* has been translated into French (*Trésor*) and was awarded the Prix Carbet des lycéens in 2017, while *Satellite City* has been translated into Dutch as *Bella Vista*. Other books include *Stories from Yard* (first published in Italian translation as *Rapporti Giamaicani*, translator E. Nones), *Doctor's Orders*, *When the Rain Stopped in Natland*, and *A Million Aunties* – longlisted for the Dublin Literary Award and featured in *The New York Times*. Her latest publications are the bilingual edition of the story *Gone to the Dogs* (*Madame* / *De Perros* (*Madame*)) (Spanish transl. / pref. E. M. D. Almarza) and the bilingual collection of poetry *Unarmed Mariners* / *Marinheiros Desarmados* (Portuguese transl. H. Lopes). A video installation based on the latter and entitled *Albatrossed* / *Unarmed Mariners* will be on display at the conference venue. As a visual artist, McKenzie has participated in exhibitions in Kingston, Singapore, Paris, Nantes and, most recently, Bersenbrück. Website: www.aleciamckenzie.com

PANELS

PANEL 1: RANK & GENDER IN THE EARLY MODERN AGE

XIAO WANG

Debating the Source of Gentlemanly Honour in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*

This paper explores the representation of honour in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, particularly within the context of early modern debates over the source of gentlemanly honour. In Act 1, Scene 3, Ulysses criticises Achilles for prioritising his “airy fame” – the admiration of others – leading him to become arrogant and dismissive of Greek leadership. While critics have often viewed Achilles’ pride as a natural aspect of his character, this passage takes on deeper significance when placed within the broader context of early modern England’s conceptualisations of honour. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, two contrasting views emerged: one defining honour as horizontal, dependent on peer recognition, and the other as vertical, derived from political authority and allegiance to the state.

The paper argues that Shakespeare critiques horizontal honour, particularly through the character of Hector, whose attachment to a mistaken understanding of honour leads to Troy’s downfall. This view of honour, reliant on the approval of others, is ultimately depicted as empty and unsustainable. In contrast, Shakespeare also presents vertical honour through the Greek camp, where honour is tied to political duty and the collective interest. Ulysses’ manipulation of Achilles’ honour exemplifies the strategic use of vertical honour, suggesting that this approach is more effective, secure, and lasting. Through this comparative analysis, the paper demonstrates how Shakespeare reflects early modern anxieties about the source of a gentleman’s honour, revealing a preference for vertical honour over horizontal. By depicting the conflict between these two conceptions of honour, the play not only critiques the dangers of relying on public opinion but also subtly affirms the legitimacy and efficacy of honour derived from political authority.

Xiao Wang is a PhD candidate in English Literature at the University of Exeter. His doctoral thesis is titled *Revisiting the Concept of Gentleman in Shakespeare’s Works*. Wang holds an MA in English Literature from Fudan University, China, and has previously worked as a Research Assistant at the English Department at Fudan University. His research interests focus on early modern literature, particularly the works of Shakespeare, as well as Chinese European cultural exchanges during the early modern period. Wang is involved in several major research projects, including the “Editing and Annotating Shakespeare in Chinese” series. He has presented at various academic conferences and has published papers, translations, and book reviews in both Chinese and English.

PAUL ARBLASTER

“Raised to Offices and Dignities by their Lawful Lord”: Recognition of Merit in the Journalistic Rhetoric of Early Seventeenth-Century Antwerp

As the Twelve Years’ Truce between the Spanish Monarchy and the Dutch Republic approached its end, a weekly newspaper was launched in Antwerp by Abraham Verhoeven, licensed by the Brussels government to print and disseminate “new tidings, victories, sieges, and the taking of towns”. One of the writers associated with this endeavour was the poet and pamphleteer Richard Verstegan. Verhoeven’s newsheets not only included reports of aristocratic elevations, knighthoods, and appointments at court, but also commentary that highlighted the absence of any mechanism in the Dutch Republic that could provide similar rewards for meritorious service. Verstegan’s satires make similar points, mocking the failure of republicanism to create social distinction while at the same time explicitly espousing a meritocratic understanding of aristocracy as a heritable reward for service rendered by oneself or one’s ancestors, and one that was in principle open to all, since all humankind is ultimately of equally lofty descent from Adam and Eve. These Antwerp monarchists paradoxically used a rhetoric of egalitarian merit to celebrate social inequalities.

The States General of the Dutch Republic rewarded service with cash gifts, pensions, offices and emoluments, but could not create noble status. Rather than develop a republican alternative to aristocracy, many wealthy Dutch regents could, and did, acquire noble status while by-passing recognition of royal authority in the Low Countries: seeking ennoblement and knighthoods from the allied monarchies of England and France, or purchasing historical lordships to enjoy the titles attached. While strange from a twenty-first-century perspective, the criticism that republicanism failed to elevate those who merited elevation seems to have hit what was a sore spot at the time.

Paul Arblaster, DPhil (Oxon), is a historian and translator who lectures in the Marie Haps Faculty of Translation and Interpreting, UCLouvain Saint-Louis Brussels, and the Louvain School of Translation and Interpreting. His research has focused on transnational communication, translation, news publication, persecution and religious mobility in early modern Europe. He has also written a general History of the Low Countries (third edition 2018).

ANDREW HISCOCK

"All sprang but from one woman and one man, Then how doth Gentry come to rise and fall?": Aemilia Lanyer and the Textual Politics of Recognition in Jacobean England

Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645) was born into a family of court musicians, but in recent decades critical attention has been focused on her on account of this notable poetic collection published during the reign of James VI/I. Susanne Woods claims for Lanyer the title of "the first woman writing in English who clearly sought professional standing as a poet" and the proposed discussion focuses precisely upon the thematics of specifically gendered aspiration in the *Salve Deus* collection and how cultural resistance to female merit may be identified and challenged through writing.

In this early seventeenth-century society where the Stuart monarch, when presented with an erudite young woman at court, reputedly enquired "but can shee spinn?", Lanyer's collection interrogates the very discourse of merit circulating at the Jacobean court and the radical inequities which may be seen to operate when the cultural marker of gender is deployed. Lanyer probes the reciprocal relations between meritocratic narratives and literary forms by exploiting a variety of generic expectations relating to the prefatory dedication, panegyric, polemic, Passion narrative, spiritual meditation and Country House lyric, for example. As the *Salve Deus* unfolds, it also performs striking movements from prose to verse or and draws attention to the changing figuration of the implied reader.

Salve Deus negotiates the daunting challenges of social mobility and merit recognition by devoting attention in part to virtuous, high-ranking women who are already located at the pinnacle of Jacobean society and who articulate modes of benign patronage. Lanyer's collection also invests energetically in rehearsing a narrative of Christ's Passion where female merit is repeatedly acknowledged. Finally, the collection turns to an elite community of women at the Berkshire country house of Cookham which remains richly sensitive to the merit to Lanyer's presence. This presentation will close with a consideration of the ways in which Lanyer's *Salve Deus* produces a cultural space for revisiting the currency of merit in Jacobean society and the potential which the non-elite woman might contribute to the public domain.

Andrew Hiscock is former Dean and Professor of Early Modern Literature at Bangor University, Wales, and Research Fellow at the Institute de Recherche sur la Renaissance, l'Âge Classique et les Lumières, Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier. He is a Fellow of the English Association and has published widely on English and French early modern literature. He is series co-editor for the Arden Early Modern Drama Guides and a former trustee of the Modern Humanities Research Association. His monographs include *Authority and Desire: Crises of Interpretation in Shakespeare and Racine* (1996); *The Uses of this World: Thinking Space in Shakespeare, Marlowe, Cary and Jonson* (2004); *Reading Memory in Early Modern Literature* (2011); and *Shakespeare, Violence and Early Modern Europe* (2022).

PANEL 2: INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND THE COMMON GOOD: MOVING IN(TO) MODERN PARADIGMS

THOMAS ROMMEL

“...the Best of all Improvers”: Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* as a Narrative on Meritocratic Entitlement

Towards the end of the 18th century, Adam Smith’s “fictional economics” (Sutherland) chronicle the rise of market economies, the expansion of trade, the professionalisation of agriculture, the growth of industrialisation and the rise of the meritocracy. Smith’s work, in particular *The Wealth of Nations*, seeks to understand how these changes affect the nature of human interaction and the functioning of society. Central to this empirical inquiry is the tension between the interests of the individual and those of the community, and in particular how these are shaped by narratives of achievement, progress and, of course, entitlement. With this he takes up an emerging concept found in literary texts beginning well before Daniel Defoe, but that continues to dominate ideas on the changing nature of society in *The Spectator* and later narratives by Eliza Haywood and Oliver Goldsmith. The continuation and thereby reaffirmation of meritocratic thought lies at the heart of Smith’s text, “a work of literature rare among economic tracts” (Economist). When Smith states that individuals acting out of self-interest and operating within a system of exchange inadvertently contribute to the public good, he does so with literary tropes and narrative strategies traditionally associated with fictional texts. The “invisible hand,” for instance, which suggests that individuals pursuing their own economic interests are beneficial to society, remains one of the most persistent metaphors used in the context of meritocratic professionals. Embedded in a narrative of merit through professionalisation, it became a key element of Smith’s contested take on human desires and motivations.

The paper seeks to illustrate Smith’s selective affinities to fictional narratives of the eighteenth century and thus reads *The Wealth of Nations* as a literary text rather than non-fiction; it critically contextualises his supposedly empirical take on merchants that “are commonly ambitious of becoming country gentlemen, and when they do, they are generally the best of all improvers.”

Thomas Rommel is a Visiting Professor at the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (CLIC) at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium. He is the former Rector and Provost of Bard College Berlin, A Liberal Arts University, and served as Director of Programs at the American Academy in Berlin. Rommel received his doctorate and Habilitation in Literary Studies at the University of Tübingen and he was Professor of Literature at Jacobs University Bremen. His latest book is an introduction to Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, *Springer Graduate Texts in Philosophy*, 2025. Rommel’s other books deal with 18th-century literature, plagiarism, canonical literature, and the complexity of text-reader interaction. He serves as co-editor of the series “Literatur – Kultur – Ökonomie / Literature – Culture – Economy” with Lang publishers.

CAROLIN GEBAUER

Writing against Male Narratives of (Social) Mobility: Feminist Voices from Wollstonecraft to Woolf

In British cultural history, achievement and success have often been linked to geographical mobility. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, for example, male aristocrats went on the Grand Tour through Continental Europe to acquire cultural education. Meanwhile, during the period of the British Empire, British imperialists attained high social status through emigrating to the British colonies. Master-narratives of the British continental tourist or colonial officer celebrate the achievements of “Brits on the move,” linking an individual’s merit and success to what mobility scholars call “motility” – that is, “the way in which an individual appropriates what is possible in the domain of mobility and puts this potential to use for his or her activities” (Kaufmann 2016, 37). However, since their protagonists are typically male, these narratives suggest that men have always been more mobile than women and thus have had better access to upward mobility and social power.

This paper explores how female activist writers challenged these dominant male views of geographical and social mobility, producing effective counter-narratives that paved the way for the women’s rights movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Focusing on narratives of mobility, including travelogues, essays, poetry, and narrative fiction, by Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Virginia Woolf, the paper examines how these female authors deployed representations of geographical mobility as a subversive literary device to negotiate questions of social mobility and gender inequality, as well as social and mobility justice. My close readings of selected passages from their works will illustrate that these authors not only discussed various forms of mobility, such as travel, transport, and forced displacement on the level of narrative content, but also staged them on the level of narrative form in an attempt to break with conventional literary traditions.

Carolin Gebauer is lecturer in British Literature and Culture at the University of Wuppertal and a postdoctoral researcher at Wuppertal’s Centre for Narrative Research. She was part of the Horizon 2020 project “Crises as OPPORTUNITIES: Towards a Level Telling Field on Migration and a New Narrative of Successful Integration” (2021-2025), funded by the European Union, and she is a member of the executive team of DIEGESIS, a bilingual interdisciplinary e-journal for narrative research. She is the author of the award-winning monograph *Making Time: World Construction in the Present-Tense Novel* (De Gruyter, 2021), and she has co-edited a special issue of DIEGESIS (“European Narratives on Migration: Concepts and Case Studies,” winter 2023) as well as the collected volumes, *Mobility, Agency, Kinship: Representations of Migration Beyond Victimhood* (Palgrave, 2024) and *Fair Narratives: Toward a Level Telling Field on Migration* (De Gruyter Brill, forthcoming).

PANEL 3: BEYOND EUROPE: THRESHOLDS TO THE GLOBAL MODERN

KINGSLEY BREMPONG OHENE ADU

Indigenous Meritocracies and Colonial Hierarchies: Rethinking Social Mobility in Casely-Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* and Sekyi's *The Anglo-Fanti*

Historically, African societies had merit-based structures in governance, trade, and social leadership, yet colonial rule introduced rigid class stratifications that disrupted indigenous social mobility. While scholarship on Joseph Ephraim Casely-Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* and Kobina Sekyi's *The Anglo-Fanti* often focuses on their critiques of colonialism, nationalism, and identity, there is limited exploration of how these novels engage with the tensions between indigenous African meritocratic traditions and the imposed hierarchy of colonial systems. Consequently, using a textual analytic framework, this study examines how African intellectuals sought to reconcile precolonial meritocratic ideals with the rigid social hierarchies imposed by British colonialism, ultimately critiquing the exclusionary mechanisms of colonial meritocracy while advocating for an African-centred model of social advancement.

Homi Bhabha's theories of hybridity, mimicry, and the "third space" provide an appropriate framework for understanding how African intellectuals negotiate their identities at the confluence between African meritocracy and colonialism. By examining these narratives through the lens of meritocracy, this study uncovers the way in which African intellectuals conceptualised and resisted the colonial reordering of social structures. It is further realised that the African intellectuals experienced varying degrees of success as they negotiated their identities between the competing local and colonial meritocratic frameworks. This study contributes significantly to discussions on African colonial modernity by shifting the focus from broad narratives to nuanced examinations of social organisation and merit. It also highlights the complex ways in which African writers negotiated competing frameworks of authority, legitimacy, and success in colonial and indigenous contexts.

Kingsley Brempong Ohene Adu is a lecturer of literature in the Department of Languages Education at the Akenten Appiah-Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development. He is currently a PhD student at the University of Ghana. His research interests are prison, exile, migrant and trauma literatures, narratology, postcolonial literature, postcolonial tragedy, genocide studies, literary theory and criticism, slavery, and African literature.

EHSAN ZIVARALAM

From Stage to State: The Role of Early Iranian Playwriting in Shaping Meritocracy

The late nineteenth century marked a profound shift in the political landscape of Iran. For over two millennia, Iranians had inherited a distinct form of monarchical rule; however, Naser al-Din Shah, the fourth Qajar king, introduced new governance concepts influenced by modernity. His engagement with these ideas set the stage for the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which transformed Iran from an absolute monarchy into a constitutional state. This shift established a new criterion for political advancement—no longer dictated solely by the monarch's will but increasingly defined by principles later associated with meritocracy. One of the key avenues through which constitutionalism became ingrained in Iranian society was the theatre. Before Naser al-Din Shah's reign and the establishment of the first theatre hall in Tehran, Western-style theatre had no presence in Iran. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, the translation of Molière's plays, performances at the Dar al-Funun hall (Iran's first theatre venue), and early attempts at Iranian playwriting positioned theatre as an effective medium for promoting political awareness and constitutionalist ideals. The earliest Iranian plays served as sharp critiques of Qajar governance, portraying its corrupt, authoritarian, and despotic structure as the primary cause of Iran's decline in the face of global powers. These pioneering playwrights, fearing their lives under a totalitarian regime, published their works anonymously while advocating for a political system based on competence and merit. With the triumph of the constitutionalists and the expansion of theatre venues, these plays were finally staged, ushering in a theatrical movement that conveyed direct political messages to audiences. During the relatively liberal period of Ahmad Shah's reign—the last Qajar monarch—various political groups, including traditional liberals and the emerging leftist movements, reimagined the ideal competent figure. Some playwrights drew upon revered historical figures from Iranian heritage, while others, influenced by Western, particularly French, literature, introduced audiences to modern representations of meritocratic individuals. However, with the onset of World War I and the looming threat of foreign occupation and colonialism, Iranian playwrights adopted a nationalist approach, critiquing Westernisation - an attitude that continues to influence Iranian playwriting to this day. This situation came to an end with the fall of the Qajar dynasty and the rise of the Pahlavi era, as Reza Shah's dictatorship prevented playwrights from continuing their work.

This study, based on playwriting from its dawn to the fall of the Qajar dynasty, seeks to explore how Iran's first playwrights envisioned, articulated, and promoted a meritocratic political structure and to assess the outcomes of their efforts. Did their envisioned structure ultimately lead to the establishment of a meritocratic system? Were they successful in solidifying their proposed concepts? Given that some of these texts remain relevant for scholars of both theatre studies and social sciences in analysing contemporary Iran, it appears that early Iranian playwrights have left a significant legacy in shaping the public perception of meritocracy.

Ehsan Zivaralam was born in Iran, in the ancient city of Shiraz, and is currently residing in Tunis. Ehsan graduated in Dramatic Literature from the University of Art in Tehran. For the past decade, Ehsan has been working as a researcher in theatre history, which led him to teaching world literature and history of dramatic literature at the University of Art in Tehran. Two years ago, he started reading for a PhD in theatre history at Clermont Auvergne University. His thesis focuses on the political aspects of Iranian theatre, particularly "Ta'zieh" and theatre during the Qajar era.

EKATERINA MOROZOVA

Inventing the Poet: Mayakovsky, Intermediality, and the Meritocratic Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde

The avant-garde movement in early twentieth-century Europe and Russia, a fascinating expression of Modernism, generated extraordinary intermedial works. In Russia, this period was marked by radical cultural shifts that broke down artistic, social, and institutional boundaries - creating a new environment where merit, rather than background or tradition, increasingly determined cultural value.

This paper proposes to read the pre-revolutionary poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky from the perspective of emergent meritocratic narratives in the pre-revolutionary period. With his background in visual art and early involvement in Russian Futurism, Mayakovsky's poetic experiments from 1912 to 1916 can be seen as both avant-garde formal innovations and a search for artistic recognition across disciplines. His work, situated alongside contemporaries like Larionov, Goncharova, Malevich, and Kandinsky, illustrates how the collapse of established hierarchies allowed figures from non-literary or marginal social positions to reinvent themselves as cultural authorities.

These years, often associated with formal innovation, were also years of social reordering. The dissolution of class boundaries, combined with the breakdown between "high" and "mass" art, enabled new forms of intermedial expression to gain its position – in posters, advertisements, paintings, and verse. Mayakovsky's transformation from a painter to a poet was not simply a matter of individual development; it was enabled by a cultural moment that rewarded experimentation, hybridity, and talent over traditional credentials.

By tracing the intermedial and intertextual strategies of Mayakovsky's early poetry, this paper explores how literature participated in and was shaped by the emergence of meritocratic thinking in pre-revolutionary Russia. It further suggests that the poet's distinctive voice – bombastic, self-authorising, and future-oriented – gives an example of how new artistic identities appeared in response to shifting values of cultural merit.

Ekaterina Morozova grew up in the Republic of Karelia, Russia, and completed her undergraduate degree in American and English Studies at Petrozavodsk State University. She spent one year on academic exchange at the University of Pécs, Hungary, and one semester at the University of West Bohemia, Czech Republic. After graduating, she taught Russian language and literature at Eton College, England, for two years. She then began her master's degree at the University of Oxford in Modern Languages. Her research focuses on modernist poetry and intermediality, including Soviet avant-garde (Mayakovsky) and T. S. Eliot's engagement with Dostoevsky in the context of Comparative Literature.

PANEL 4: BETWEEN/WITHIN/BEYOND THE COLONIAL LOGIC OF MERIT

NINA AIDAM

Meritocracy and Cultural Disruption in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*

Meritocracy, often seen as a system of social mobility based on individual achievement, takes on a disruptive role in postcolonial societies where indigenous structures of success predate colonial interventions. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* critiques the imposition of colonial meritocratic ideals through missionary education, revealing how such frameworks fracture traditional communities. This paper applies Postcolonial Theory, particularly Ngũgĩ's *Decolonising the Mind* and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, to analyse how colonial education upholds Western dominance while marginalising indigenous leadership. Additionally, drawing on Kwame Anthony Appiah's critique of meritocracy, this paper examines how the novel exposes the cultural limitations of meritocratic ideals that assume a universal standard of success.

Waiyaki, the novel's protagonist, embodies the tensions between Western education and indigenous identity. Positioned as a leader due to his schooling, he believes education can unite his people, yet his failure underscores the incompatibility of colonial meritocracy with traditional Kikuyu values. While Western meritocracy privileges formal education, the novel presents oral traditions, communal responsibility, and spiritual authority as alternative meritocratic systems, challenging the Western assumption that education equates to power and progress.

By situating *The River Between* within global discussions of meritocracy, this paper highlights how Ngũgĩ's novel critiques the ideological imposition of colonial education on African societies. In doing so, it resists the hegemony of Western meritocratic paradigms and reclaims indigenous knowledge as equally legitimate.

Nina Aidam is a graduate student and Graduate Teaching Assistant at Radford University, Virginia, pursuing a master's degree in English. Her research interests include postcolonial literature, gender studies, and African narratives, with a particular focus on how colonial and indigenous frameworks intersect in literary texts. She has presented at various academic conferences, including the College English Association (CEA) and the Literature Association of Ghana Conference. Her current research explores meritocracy and cultural fragmentation in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* through a postcolonial lens.

ASANTE LUCY MTENJE

“Sikusinja’s Success deserves all the Praise?!”: Examining the Myth of Meritocracy in J.W. Gwengwe’s *Sikusinja ndi Gwenembe*

The concept of meritocracy, as the organisation of a society or an economy based on merit, where key individual factors for the meritocratic formula for success are innate talent, hard work, proper attitude and playing by the rules (McNamee and Miller 2014: 16), finds expression across various linguistic and cultural contexts, with literature playing a role in the construction, circulation and critique of meritocratic ideas. As much as meritocracy is valorised as a system intent on abolishing discrimination against individual success based, for example, on race, gender, religion or social class, if everyone is given equal opportunity, there are other forms of distinction that are overlooked under the guise of meritocratic thought.

In this paper, I examine *Sikusinja ndi Gwenembe*, a classic Malawian play adapted from a folktale and published in 1965 by J.W. Gwengwe, as a text that privileges a meritocratic narrative in its depiction of the success journeys of twin brothers, Sikusinja and Gwenembe. I revisit the narrative of these twin brothers which is often deployed in Malawian popular culture as a morality tale of how the lives of two brothers, born of the same parents and given equal opportunities, can turn out in totally different ways, with Gwenembe being the villain of the narrative. I argue that a close reading of the childhood of the twin boys, Sikusinja and Gwenembe and how their lives eventually turn out, reveals how cultural biases and valorisation of certain male physical and non-physical attributes undermines meritocracy and consequently influences the twins’ capacity, or lack thereof, to achieve success.

Asante Lucy Mtenje is an Associate Professor in the Department of Literary Studies at University of Malawi where she teaches courses in African literature. She holds a PhD in English Studies from Stellenbosch University. Her research has been published in academic journals such as *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *African Studies Review*, *Hecate: International Journal of Women’s Liberation*, *Journal of the African Literature Association*, *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*. Her current research interests include gender and sexualities, Malawian life writing, popular culture and Malawian oral literature. She is recipient of a number of fellowships including the STIAS Iso Lomso Fellowship (2022-2025), JIAS Creative Writing Fellowship (2021), the Africa-Oxford (AfOx) Visiting Fellowship (2020) and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS)- African Humanities Program (AHP) postdoctoral fellowship (2017). She is also a published poet and short story writer.

ANGELIQUE GOLDING

From ATCAL to Wasafiri: Challenging Meritocratic Narratives in British Education and Literature

This paper traces the evolution of meritocratic narratives in British education and literature from the late 1970s to the present, focusing on the pioneering role of the Association for the Teaching of Caribbean, African, South Asian and Associated Literatures (ATCAL) and its legacy journal, *Wasafiri*. I examine how these initiatives have challenged traditional British and canonical notions of literary merit and contributed to reshaping the British literary canon through the explicit inclusion of Commonwealth literature, as it was then termed.

My paper will explore ATCAL's foundational activism and *Wasafiri*'s subsequent and initial pedagogical provision of a critical forum for discussing what is now termed Black and Asian British Writing. I examine the historical context of ATCAL's formation and *Wasafiri*'s launch, showing how these efforts intersected with broader debates on immigration, education, and multiculturalism in Britain. Drawing on archival materials and interviews with key ATCAL members, I will demonstrate the organisation's intervention in British English curricula and its influence on the teaching and reception of Black British writing pioneers published in *Wasafiri*'s early issues, such as Earl Lovelace, Derek Walcott and Joan Riley.

Through close readings of articles on selected works of these Black British writing pioneers and discussions about the National Curriculum, I demonstrate how these and similar works have responded to and challenged meritocratic paradigms in both educational and literary spheres. These texts exemplify diverse genres—novels, poetry, essays—that redefine literary achievement by foregrounding marginalised voices.

Angelique Golding has a master's in Black British Writing from Goldsmiths University. In 2020 she won a LAHP Collaborative Doctoral Award with Queen Mary University of London and the British Library to undertake archival research on the literary magazine *Wasafiri*. Her research, completed in December 2024, draws on methodologies from archival, and postcolonial literary studies and magazine scholarship. She is co-editor of *Wasafiri 112: Reimagining Education*, which considers what education means within and beyond the classroom, investigating government intervention and the reclamation and exploration of decolonisation, and addressing the forces of change and continuity in Britain today.

PANEL 5: RESISTING DOMINANT PARADIGMS

AIDA BANAKAR

Staging Meritocracy: Gender, Power, and Resistance in Bahram Beyzaei's Theater

Bahram Beyzaei's Theater, emerging during Iran's New Wave movement, critically engages with meritocracy by portraying women who navigate shifting power structures. Under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime, modernisation policies expanded women's rights, yet systemic barriers remained. The 1979 Islamic Revolution then reinforced traditional values, limiting female autonomy. Beyzaei's plays, spanning both eras, explore these tensions through female protagonists who challenge rigid social orders.

Analysing *Divan-e Balkh*, *Nodbeh*, *Death of Yazdgerd*, *Fathnameh-ye Kalat*, *Shab-e Hezar-o Yekom*, *Afra*, and *Chaharra*, this paper examines how Beyzaei critiques meritocratic ideals. His heroines possess intelligence and resilience, yet their social mobility is constrained by patriarchal and political forces. Through mythic and historical narratives, Beyzaei exposes meritocracy's exclusions, questioning whether individual talent alone can overcome structural oppression. This study situates his work within global literary critiques of meritocracy, highlighting how his dramatic forms – fragmented narratives, intertextuality, and nonlinear time – challenge dominant paradigms. Ultimately, Beyzaei's plays reveal the limits of meritocracy for women in societies shaped by both modernisation and religious conservatism, offering a powerful literary critique of gender and power.

Aida Banakar holds a bachelor's degree in theatre directing and a master's degree in art studies and research from Shiraz University. She is an Assistant Professor at the Shiraz Higher Institute of Art and a former lecturer at Shiraz University of Art and the Honarshahr Theatre Academy. Her research focuses on Iranian theatre and the philosophy of art.

SAMANTHA WHARTON

Black Women Writing Against the Grain: Migration, Subjectivity, and Literary Recognition

This study examines the literary production of Black women writers in 1980s Britain, exploring how their work engages with and challenges dominant notions of writing meritocracy. Focusing on Buchi Emecheta's *Head Above Water*, Joan Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight*, and Winsome Pinnock's *Leave Taking*, this analysis interrogates how these authors position Black female subjectivity within a literary landscape that has historically marginalised their voices. Writing from diasporic perspectives, these authors disrupt hegemonic literary values by foregrounding lived experiences of migration, racial exclusion, and gendered oppression.

Through a realist aesthetic, memory retrieval, and retrospective narration, these texts contest the structures that determine literary legitimacy, asserting the authority of Black women's voices in shaping British literary discourse. Drawing on Carole Boyce Davies' work on migratory subjectivity, this study situates these narratives within a broader historical continuum of dislocation and belonging. The protagonists in these works are carefully constructed figures through which the authors interrogate how Black women navigate a social and literary framework that often denies their authority. These narratives serve as a catalyst for exploring broader struggles of recognition, legitimacy, and agency within the fictional world and the wider British literary landscape.

This research examines how these texts critique the meritocratic ideals underpinning literary production, revealing the barriers to institutional acceptance for Black women writers. The analysis also considers how the narratives negotiate tensions between the "mother country" and Black British identity, exploring how literary merit is constructed and contested. While deeply rooted in the 1980s, these works resonate with contemporary debates on migration, authorship, and cultural legitimacy, offering an urgent re-evaluation of whose voices are valued in literary history.

Samantha Wharton is an academic writer and educator with a master's degree from Goldsmiths, University of London. With 19 years of experience teaching English, she specialises in diversifying the curriculum and engaging students in critical literary analysis. She has contributed to educational publishing, including co-authoring the *Leave Taking* study guide, which supports teachers and students in exploring the play's themes, language, and historical context. As a Teaching Associate at EMC and a Senior Associate for AQA, Samantha plays a key role in shaping English curriculum development. She has delivered CPD workshops on *Leave Taking*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and diverse literature at institutions such as the Lyric Theatre and Fitzalan School. Her research examines literary meritocracy and Black women's writing in Britain, exploring how authors navigate themes of migration, identity, and recognition. Passionate about fostering critical thinking, she continues to write, lecture, and develop resources for English teachers nationwide.

PANEL 6: PATHWAYS THROUGH MERITOCRACY: CONFORMING, RESISTING, SURPASSING NORMS?

MARIE ROSE ARONG

Collaboration and Complicity as Pathways to Merit in Anglophone Filipino Novels

The 1998 Philippine Centennial celebration was meant to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the country's independence from more than 300 years of Spanish colonisation. However, the 1898 Philippine revolution against Spain is often considered an unfinished revolution because U.S. collaboration instead resulted in another colonisation by the Americans, and then a third under Japanese occupation. During the Spanish period (1565-1898) Spanish mestizos gained large tracts of land and became hacendados who later formed the Filipino elite. When the Americans overstayed their welcome, they worked with the same haciendas to justify their "benevolent assimilation." While those who refused to collaborate were vilified by the Americans and the Filipino collaborators, their time for collaboration came during the Japanese occupation.

A hallmark of the historical accounts about the colonisation of the Philippines, then, has been the ubiquity of collaborators among the landed mestizos. In her book about class in Filipino society, Caroline Hau notes how the "[n]ationalist critique of the elites targets the pigmentocracy" since it "places a social premium on the lightness of skin color." While pigmentocracy is a form of privilege traditionally associated with the elites, despite the nationalist critique, the insidious nature of pigmentocracy meant that their sins of collaboration and complicity seeped into the rest of Filipino society.

This paper examines two Anglophone Filipino novels, *Ilustrado* (2010) by Miguel Syjuco and *The Collaborators* (2022) by Katrina Tuviera, that explore the motivations of ordinary Filipinos who became collaborators throughout Philippine history. This paper argues that the form that meritocracy takes in postcolonial societies like the Philippines can be traced to its long history of colonisation, first under Spain, and later under the U.S.

Marie Rose Arong is an Associate Professor at the University of the Philippines Cebu. Her research interests include narratology, postcolonial literature, Cebuano history and culture, and medical humanities. Her articles have appeared in the *Global South*, *Postcolonial Studies*, *Kritika Kultura*, *ARIEL*, and *Text Matters*. She is the author of *A Veritable Terra Incognita: Situating the Philippines in Postcolonial Literature* (2020, University of Santo Tomas Publishing House).

YIYI HE

Confessions of a Model Minority: Meritocratic Complicity and Resistance in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015)

Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), a darkly satirical spy novel narrated by a biracial Vietnamese communist agent embedded in South Vietnamese exile communities post-1975, dismantles the model minority myth by exposing its roots in colonialist and Cold War-era meritocratic logics. Through its unreliable narrator's confession—a coerced act of self-surveillance—the novel interrogates how racialised narratives of assimilation, self-reinvention, and “exceptional” achievement weaponise Asian identities to uphold hierarchies of power. This essay argues that *The Sympathizer* critiques meritocracy, not only as a myth of individual mobility but as a structural tool of imperial violence, reframing the model minority trope as a performance of ideological compliance that obscures histories of displacement and erasure. By analysing the novel's formal hybridity (blending espionage thriller, political satire, and metafictional confession) and its thematic preoccupation with doublespeak, betrayal, and fractured identity, this study positions Nguyen's work as a radical act of literary “worldmaking” (Cheah 2017) that destabilises meritocratic worldviews.

Ultimately, *The Sympathizer* reframes the model minority not as a benign stereotype but as a colonial construct, contingent on the erasure of U.S. imperial violence and the reduction of diasporic subjects to politically neutral “achievers.” The narrator's final act of rebellion—crafting a confession that implicates both capitalist and communist regimes—ruptures the myth's false binary of meritocratic “freedom” versus collectivist tyranny. By centering a protagonist who is both victim and accomplice, Nguyen rejects the myth's demand for ideological purity, instead proposing a radical ethics of ambivalence. In doing so, the novel critiques meritocracy as a transnational project, linking Asian American racialisation to global histories of militarism and displacement.

Yiyi He received her PhD from the interdisciplinary Graduate Programme of Cultural Studies at Queen's University, Canada. She attained her master's degree from the Foreign Languages and Cultures Department at Fudan University, Shanghai. Her research mostly engages in a critical dialogue between contemporary environmental writing and ecocriticism in China and the Asian North American context, to promote knowledge mobility in general, and international ecocritical dialogue in particular, between East and West, with a focus on the intersection of the environment and race as represented in literary works. Yiyi's research interests include ecocriticism, Asian North American literature, comparative literature, and cultural studies. She has published articles in both Chinese and English, such as in *A&HCI*, *Scopus*, and *CSSCI* journals. She currently teaches English language and literature at Sichuan International Studies University (SISU), Chongqing, the People's Republic of China.

UHURU PHALAFALA

Political and Spiritual Dimensions of Play in 21st Century Black Feminist Poetry

A moment of silence
To listen to the good book
(not written in your language):
Gather your first born sons
And all adult males
As offerings of your race
To the shrine of modernity

Above is a poem from my epic poem *Mine Mine Mine* (2023), chronicling my grandfather's journey as a migrant worker in the gold mines of Johannesburg. In this paper, I historicise the Southern African mining revolution to colonial contact and its inauguration of the Calvinist work ethic that evolved into extractive regimes of both the land and its people.

I argue that “play” was one of the primary rationales for declaring the land and its inhabitants as empty. Play became fertile grounds for seeding the notion of the native as lazy and unproductive, which was seen as the reason the land was “wild” and “unworked.” The natives were denied humanity and deemed unworthy of the land because the protestant work ethic framed this as ungodly, and because the colonising mission was purportedly ordained by God, it was a puritanical and ethical cause of action to take ownership of the land and tame its wilds: the native, the fauna and flora. In the taming of the savage, a new logic of merit and reward was entrenched, one that destroyed the cyclic nature of work and rest, labour and play.

This history is foundational to the intersections of meritocracy, respectability politics, race, and gender. It informs contemporary literature on “rest as resistance,” “play as reparative,” and on the ongoing praxis of divesting from racial capitalism, such as rejecting “a seat at the table.” I use various poems from South Africa, including “Mine Mine Mine,” and the black diaspora as site of analysis.

Uhuru Phalafala is a writer, researcher, archivist, and scholar with interests in critical race studies, indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies, social movements, and jazz. She is a senior lecturer in literary studies at Stellenbosch University and is the author of *Mine Mine Mine*, *The Collected Poetry of Keorapetse Kgotsitsile*, 1969-2018, and *Keorapetse Kgotsitsile & the Black Arts Movement: Poetics of Possibility*. In 2021, she repatriated and republished *Malibongwe: Poems From The Struggle* by ANC Women through her project, Recovering Subterranean Archives. She is currently working on a book project on black ecological practices.

PANEL 7: UP OR OUT: MERITOCRACY AS A SPACE OF OPPORTUNITY OR CULTURAL TRAP

SABINE HILLEN

Le Mérite et les Passions Tristes: Edouard Louis's Engagement with Meritocratic Ideas

In an article which provides an interesting synthesis of the ideas of Michael Sandel and Emmanuel Todd, Baptiste Touverey draws attention to the imperfections of meritocracy in its current form and goes as far as to denounce Obama's famous phrase – "Yes, you can!" - as pernicious (Touverey 90-91). Merit is not just a question of effort; it is also the result of global and intergenerational competition between the young and the not-so-young, a question of constantly renewed technocracy and a struggle in which the strongest are likely to prevail. In short, the belief in merit creates inequalities of opportunity across the board. This is reflected in recent French literature and a recurring element in Edouard Louis's Oeuvre.

I will read Edouard Louis's texts through the lens of Michael Sandel. Meritocracy, according to Sandel, leads elites to overestimate personal merit. Resentment emerges at the bottom of the ladder, where the injustice of a partial apprenticeship accentuates rivalry. This resentment has too often been portrayed in politics and the media as populism of either the right or the left, even if this meant paralysing debates on the common good. Edouard Louis's texts assemble political influences that destabilise the very notion of living together. To find merit, the narrative shows how characters must survive unemployment, their families, alcoholism, accidents at school and work, domestic violence and lack of financial resources.

What emerges is an impossible discourse on merit in a war of all against all, but also the idea of global interdependence on a planetary scale (Cf. Sandel 131). If writing is shaped by conflicting ideologies and if tragedy is born of "the confrontation [...] of incompatible points of view" (Bourdieu 9), Louis's texts complicate this incompatibility and return to the subject's attempt at overcoming political powerlessness.

Sabine Hillen works at VUB in Linguistic and Literary Studies. Her PhD on French Literature and her interest in social phenomena of Literary Theory have led to articles on French writers of twentieth-century books on Cultural History and Adaptation Theory.

IGA NOWICZ

Derailing Meritocracy: *Ein schönes Ausländerkind* by Toxische Pommes (2024)

The relationship between migration and meritocracy is complex. On the one hand, a migrant's belief in the meritocratic values of the host society can motivate them to "play by the rules" and adapt to the norms governing their new social context. At the same time, the idea of meritocracy can be used to justify inequalities and differences in social status among migrants (Lopez Rodriguez 2010).

This paper examines how meritocratic narratives are challenged in the novel *Ein schönes Ausländerkind* by Toxische Pommes (2024). Focusing on the central father-daughter relationship, the novel tells the story of a Yugoslav family who fled their country and settled in Vienna as war refugees. Written in the first person, the text presents two opposing life trajectories: while the father never obtains a work permit and eventually withdraws from public life, his daughter integrates into Austrian society, earning a doctorate and securing a stable job. However, she remains haunted by the fact that her successful "integration" has come at the cost of her relationship with her father.

In my presentation, I offer a close analysis of the text, paying particular attention to its use of multilingual practices to explore the tension between Austria's dominant society and its migrant population. I argue that by centering a "failed migrant" who remains separated from the Austrian mainstream, the novel challenges the hegemonic concept of meritocracy and questions neoliberal understandings of migration, labour, and productivity.

Iga Nowicz earned a PhD in German Studies from King's College London and the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her interdisciplinary project was awarded the Women in German Studies Book Prize (2018) and was published as *Interrupted Stories: Multilingualism in Post-Yugoslav Literature in Germany and Austria* with Peter Lang Oxford in 2024. Iga's interests include comparative literature, gender studies, decolonial theory, literary translation, and creative writing.

MICHAELA OBERWINKLER

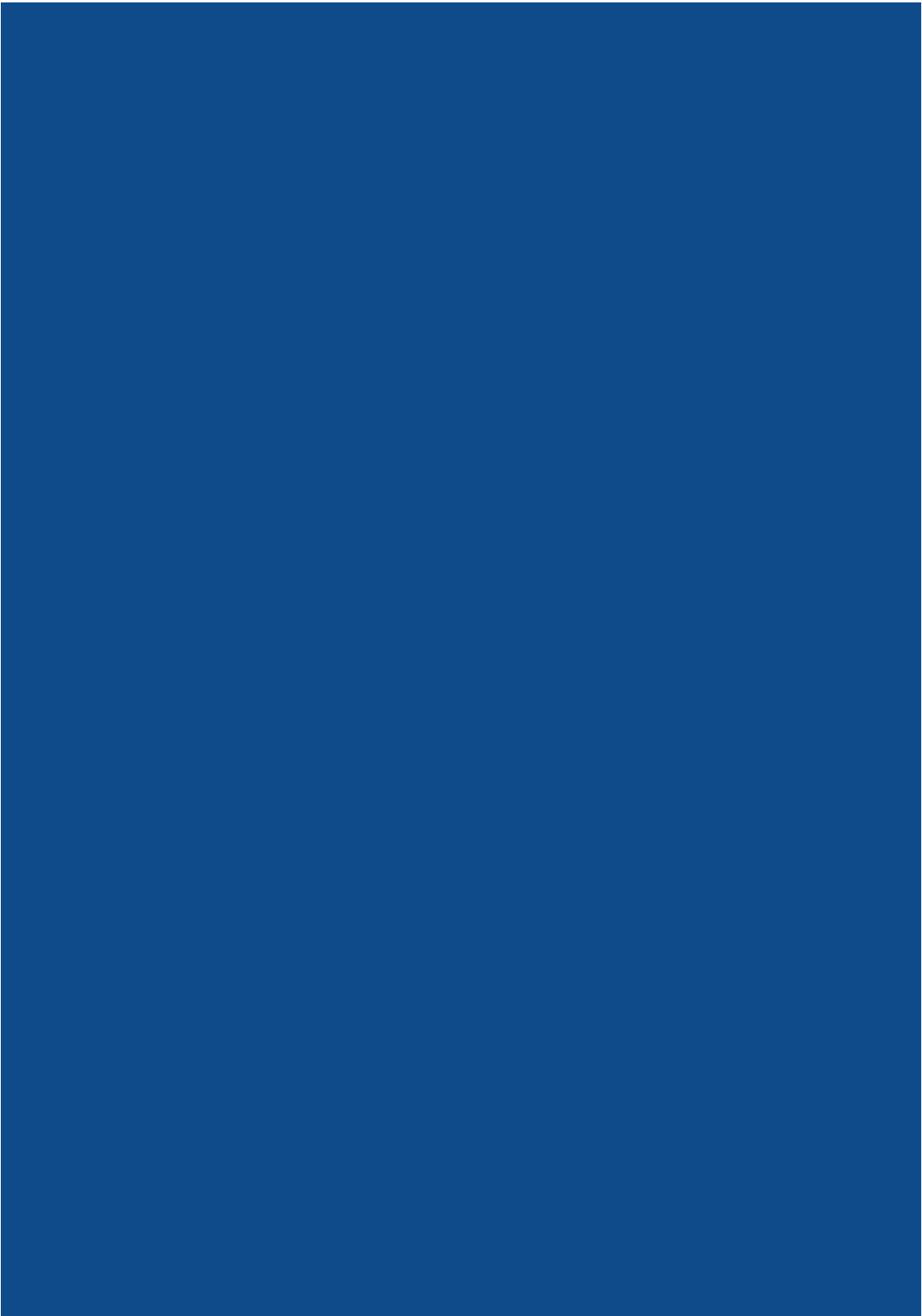
Meritocracy, AI, and the Ethics of Creation: Rethinking the Power of Language in Rie Qudan's *Sympathy Tower Tokyo* (2024)

Until the Meiji period, Japan maintained a strict class-based feudal system, well known for its samurai code. This structure began to shift with the Meiji Restoration and the introduction of compulsory education in 1872, fostering a transition from class hierarchy to meritocracy. Motivated by a perceived need to catch up with Western nations, this shift remains ingrained in Japanese society, where individuals are seen as responsible not only for their own success but also for national progress.

Rie Qudan's Akutagawa Prize-winning novel, *Sympathy Tower Tokyo* critically examines this belief in meritocracy. The novel portrays a society where criminals are viewed as victims of their circumstances rather than as accountable individuals. Its protagonist, star architect Sara Machina, is commissioned to design a tower in central Tokyo where offenders can reside in comfort, provoking resistance from law-abiding citizens enduring harsh conditions. The novel raises pressing questions about contemporary meritocracy, particularly through its depiction of AI's role in the protagonist's life. Does AI contribute to social equity, or does it reinforce existing disparities? This question extends to the novel's creation itself, as Qudan has acknowledged using AI in her writing process.

The study explores these themes through a close textual analysis and interviews with Qudan, where she critiques AI's linguistic limitations and the excessive use of foreign words in katakana, in contrast to the protagonist's preferred name for the tower, a harmoniously resonating kanji combination (Tokyo-to dojo-to). As AI continues to shape both literature and society, concerns over authorship and intellectual contribution to literary forms will become increasingly relevant, necessitating critical engagement with these evolving dynamics.

Michaela Oberwinkler is a Research and Teaching Fellow at the Institute for Modern Japanese Studies at the University of Düsseldorf. She completed her PhD in Japanese linguistics at the University of Tübingen, focusing on emojis and stickers. Additional areas of interest include translation studies, particularly the specific challenges involved in translating Japanese literature.



CONVENERS:

Maria PACE AQUILINA, Eva Ulrike PIRKER
and Suzanne SCAFE.

ORGANISING TEAM:

Mehran GHANDI, Maxime Louise HONINX, Josephine
OFEI, Elisabeth Abena OSEI, Tola OSHITELU and
Ceydanur TEMUROK.

WE THANK

Anaïs CABAN-CHASTAS, Florian DEROO, José MABITA,
Dady MBUMBA, Beau SERRUS, Gry ULSTEIN, Feras
SAAD, Kurt TILKIN, Cedrick VAN DIJCK, Klaas VAN
GELDER, Bas VAN LITH.

FUNDING

This conference was enabled by funding from the
European Union (DOI: 10.3030/101088378).
Additional funding has been received from the
Rectorate, the Centre for Literary and Intermedial
Crossings, and the Doctoral School of the
Human Sciences at Vrije Universiteit Brussel.
We thank these organisations for supporting us.



merlit.vub.be



CENTRE FOR LITERARY &
INTERMEDIAL CROSSINGS
RESEARCH GROUP



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission