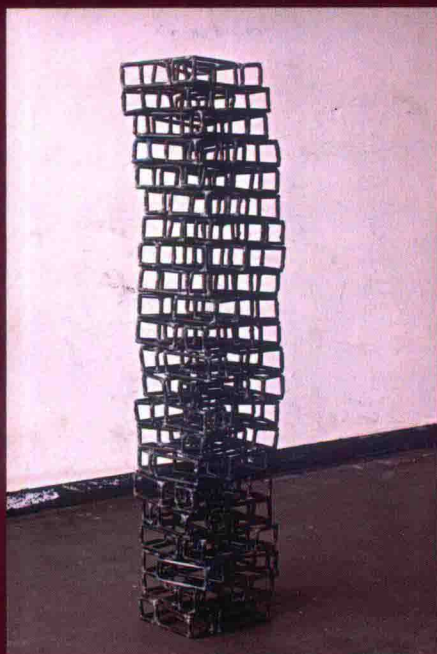


Louisa Söllner / Anita Vržina (eds.)

# Fictionalizing the World

Rethinking the Politics of Literature



PETER LANG  
EDITION

## Fictionalizing the World



Louisa Söllner / Anita Vržina (eds.)

# Fictionalizing the World

Rethinking the Politics of Literature



PETER LANG  
EDITION

**Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Söllner, Louisa, editor. | Vržina, Anita, editor.

Title: Fictionalizing the world : rethinking the politics of literature / Louisa Söllner, Anita Vržina (eds.).

Description: Frankfurt am Main ; New York : Peter Lang, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015037565 | ISBN 9783631656846

Subjects: LCSH: Politics and literature.

Classification: LCC PN51 .F475 2016 | DDC 809/.93358-dc23 LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015037565>

Cover illustration:

Pieces Skulptur von: Laura Koren Jahr: 2012

Photo: Nadine Koren

ISBN 978-3-631-65684-6 (Print)

E-ISBN 978-3-653-05053-0 (E-Book)

DOI 10.3726/978-3-653-05053-0

© Peter Lang GmbH

Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

Frankfurt am Main 2016

All rights reserved.

Peter Lang Edition is an Imprint of Peter Lang GmbH.

Peter Lang – Frankfurt am Main · Bern · Bruxelles · New York ·  
Oxford · Warszawa · Wien

All parts of this publication are protected by copyright. Any utilisation outside the strict limits of the copyright law, without the permission of the publisher, is forbidden and liable to prosecution. This applies in particular to reproductions, translations, microfilming, and storage and processing in electronic retrieval systems.

This publication has been peer reviewed.

[www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com)

# Contents

Introduction .....7

Acknowledgements .....15

1. Fiction and Identity

*Derritt Mason*  
Vulnerable Fictions: Queer Youth, Storytelling,  
and Narratives of Victimization .....19

*Anita Vržina*  
Authentically Black: Recognition, Authorship,  
and Fictions of Black Authenticity.....37

*Nabil N. Barham*  
Poets of the Unseen: Musing Through Loss and Displacement  
in Identity Formation in and Around the Palestine/Israel Conflict .....61

*Juliane Fiedler*  
Nation-Building in Nineteenth Century German Literature:  
The Example of Wilhelm Raabe .....79

2. Spaces off/in Fiction

*Maha El Hissy*  
Negotiating Colonial Legacies in Tayeb Salih's  
*Season of Migration to the North*.....97

*Bela Gligorova*  
An Auto-Performative Humor-filled Journey with  
Jonathan Demme's *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987):  
Listening to Spalding Gray 'Gesture' his Way  
through the Cinematic Reality of Intersecting  
'Contact Zones' .....113

*Kathleen Keirn*  
Hybrid Cosmopolitanisms, Heterotopias and  
The Female American .....127

*Louisa Söllner*  
Restaging the Colonial Encounter: Exhibition Culture and  
Practices of Fictionalization.....141

3. The Function of Irony in Fiction

*Andrew Allen*  
Irony and Sincerity in A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius....163

*Reinhard Möller*  
Irony under Control? Kierkegaard’s Conception of Controlled  
Irony as a Critical Theory of Aesthetic Fictionalization.....181

Contributors .....199

# Introduction

Some book titles win over readers through their transparency. The title of this collection is not one of them. *Fictionalizing the World*, while seemingly obvious at first glance, is rather a title that leaves questions open, instead of providing answers. It seems to postulate the existence of two separate realms – “fiction” on the one hand, and “the world” on the other. Yet, there are many ways to understand the proposition that “the world” is exposed to acts or processes of fictionalization. One way is to understand fictionalization as another form of representing the world. This is based on the assumption that fiction acts as a mirror in which the world as we know it is articulated, criticized, deconstructed, or affirmed. Understood this way, fiction is a derivative realm that emerges in response to the spaces constituting the world. While fiction may reflect on these spaces, it at the same time remains confined within its own boundaries. A second way to read the title is to envision fictionalization as a more transgressive activity, one that gives fiction a certain power of agency. Instead of remaining within its borders, fiction thus becomes part of the dynamics that create and affect the world. The idea that fiction leaks into, infects, or colonizes the world is frequently explored in fiction itself. It can be imagined as a disorienting condition in which all ties to reality are lost, or it can be seen as a utopian condition of endless liberties.

These two potential readings of our title represent two different approaches to the realm that we refer to as fiction. While one reading views fiction as a reaction or a response to the world, the other regards it as having the power to transform the world and subject it to fantasy. Both positions seem to postulate borders between fiction and the world. While these boundaries can be modified and trespassed, they are boundaries nevertheless. But are fiction and the world necessarily two separate areas? In our general understanding, “fiction” is often aligned with the concept of the “imaginary,” the “invented,” or even what is “untrue” or “false.” These associations suggest that fiction is, in fact, a realm separate from the world. Such a definition of fiction relies on the assumption that there is such a thing



as “the world” as a knowable entity which exists before and independently of its fictionalization. This is a premise that can be questioned.

It is difficult to imagine a way of accessing the world that is not defined by processes of mediation, translation, interpretation, and fictionalization. Hence, the anterior position of the concept “world” in our title is called into question. If there is no world without the mediation of culture, if the world is knowable and perceptible only in terms of the concepts we are equipped with by our culture, then the fictionalization of the world is not a reaction to the already existing world; it is the foundation and source of our comprehension of the world. Once we accept the impact that fiction exerts on our understanding of the world, we also have to acknowledge the political dimension of fictionalization. What is at stake here is a new understanding of the immediacy of sensory experience and its relationship to – and indeed dependence on – a specific, socially constructed, normative system of thought.

Recent years have seen a renewed interest in the relationship between fiction and the world – or, more broadly, between aesthetics and politics – in the fields of literary studies, aesthetic theory, and philosophy. For French philosopher Jacques Rancière, for example, politics and aesthetics are inseparable. Rancière argues that at the core of both practices is a specific distribution of the sensible and a way of connecting *sense* and *sense* – in other words, sensory experience, and the way of making sense of it. This is also what connects art and life and endows art with political potential. According to Rancière, art in “the aesthetic regime of the arts” is no longer separate from life (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 23). Art that is not relegated to the position of the Other as opposed to life, but is rather part and parcel of life itself has a potential for intervention and political action. Rancière’s theory of aesthetics attempts to articulate a theoretical position that does not lament the failures of aesthetic and political collaboration, but rather sees art as an active participant on the political stage. This does not mean that art can be used in or by politics for specific goals. The politics of art do not lie in the intention of the author or the recipient, but within art itself and, more importantly, in the aesthetic experience of art. Art, according to Rancière, has the power to intervene in life by creating an aesthetic rupture, or what he calls “dissensus” – a rupture between *sense* and *sense* resulting from a reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible. Rancière thus not

only frees art from of its assumed autonomy, which renders it powerless; he also empowers art's spectator, who he no longer sees in the position of the passive consumer of commodities, but as a participant in an autonomous aesthetic experience that provides the reader with the potential for political action.

*Fictionalizing the World* contributes to this contemporary debate on the politics of fiction with ten detailed studies that explore the relationship between fiction and politics in literary texts and artworks from a range of literary and academic traditions. These essays focus on the aspect of the political in the works themselves as well as on the relationship between fiction and politics in, and of, literary texts. In their analysis of works from different traditions and time periods, the essays demonstrate that the imaginary worlds we enter through the pages of a book are more than mere reflections of the world. Instead, fiction offers an arena where reality can be not only represented, but also rescinded and reimagined. Works of fiction help us to dismantle fictional constructs that influence our understanding of the world, while offering alternative views, interpretations, and meanings. Fiction thus creates potential for change within the existing systems of thought, modes of being, and subjectivities. We understand the subtitle of our volume, *Rethinking the Politics of Literature*, in the sense that the essays in this collection explore the interactions between "fiction" and "the world" not as separate, but as intimately entwined realms that continue to influence and shape each other.

This volume is divided into three thematic sections. The first section of this collection focuses on politics and literature in its exploration of the relationship between FICTION AND IDENTITY. The four essays in this section address the power of literature – not simply to achieve a particular goal set up by identity politics; rather, the essays see literature as a stage where questions about identity, both personal and communal, can be asked and new models and subject positions can be explored.

Inspired by Susanne Luhmann's and Deborah Britzman's theories of queer pedagogy, DERRITT MASON's essay explores how the currently pervasive narratives of queer youth – the narrative of victimization and of well-adjusted queer youth – are taken up in two magical realist novels by Francesca Lia Block, which offer not only a new alternative narrative of sexual identity, but also problematize the notion of identity itself. Mason

argues that the narratives of sexual identity, while fictional in origin, circulate as truths and influence the way we interpret the “reality” of queer youth. Mason suggests that Block’s novels show how the narratives of sexual identity of the novels’ protagonists are not fixed, but are constantly being “re-” and “de-storied” based on the tropes and narratives of sexual identity they are confronted with. Drawing on his reading of Block’s novels and on the theories of queer pedagogy, Mason proposes “storying” as a theory of sexual identity that foregrounds the power of fiction, which is understood here both as literature and as stories told by others for the creation of one’s authentic view of self and one’s own identity.

In her reading of Percival Everett’s novel *Erasure*, ANITA VRŽINA explores the intersection of fiction and reality on the level of both the literature business and that of the personal identity of an African American author in contemporary multicultural consumerist society. Taking as her starting point Charles Taylor’s theory of recognition, which proposes that one’s authentic individual identity is a dialogical creation, and Lionel Trilling’s notions of authenticity and sincerity, Vržina argues that in our contemporary postmodern moment, where access to black community and history is possible only through the mediation of culture, authentic black identity and authentic black art are contingent on broader cultural and social conditions. In the search for individual authentic identity in an attempt to create art that is free, the black artist needs to negotiate the web of conditions under which they are creating their art: the laws of the market in the consumer society, expectations placed on them by that market, and the community they are always necessarily identified with, as well as their own need and desire to create art that is free from constraints and limitations placed on it by society at large. In such conditions, Vržina argues, both art and identity all too easily become a masquerade that renders the search for authenticity an almost impossible task.

NABIL N. BARHAM’s essay explores a contemporary issue, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to offer a new paradigm of identity politics in and through literature. For Barham, the political power of literature does not lie in its ability to represent, criticize, or even deconstruct the identity-forming binary oppositions that inform the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Literature, through its ability to reimagine the conflict and to inspire empathy through aesthetic means, can offer a new model for a politics of reconciliation. In

his discussion of poems by two Israeli and two Palestinian poets, Barham argues that poetry can have a potential for the future. Drawing on Michael Rothenberg's notion of "multidirectional memory," Dominick LaCapra's "empathic unsettlement," and Edward Said's "contrapuntal reading," Barham analyzes how these four poems treat the conflict's history and the ensuing mythologization and abstraction of its key moments and images (the *Nakba* and the *Sabra*) that result in the conflict's perpetuation. Barham shows how the four poems negotiate these abstractions by offering a new imagery of co-resistance that is able to escape the established stereotyped narratives and thereby generate novel readings of, and rationales for, those founding moments and images. "Musing through" is Barham's shorthand for the strategies of poetic mediation and imagination that can open up a space for a vision of the future that is informed, but not trapped, by the past and can thus envision a path toward reconciliation.

In her analysis of the work of the nineteenth-century German author, Wilhelm Raabe, JULIANE FIEDLER focuses on Raabe's treatment of the Schiller Festival – the celebration of Friedrich Schiller's 100th birthday – that marked the awakening of German nationalist thought and the political ideal of national unity. By focusing on two texts by Raabe that offer different treatments of the festival – the poem "Zum Schillerfest," written for and read at the Schiller Festival in 1859 several years before the unification, and the novel *Der Dräumling*, published in 1871, the year of the German unification – Fiedler argues how literature, and culture in general, can have a dual function in the creation of a nation. Following Benedict Anderson's understanding of the nation as an imagined community, in the first part of her essay, Fiedler discusses rhetorical strategies and tropes used by Raabe in "Zum Schillerfest" to awaken a sense of collective identity and national unity. While the mythological, religious, historical, and intertextual references serve to enhance a sense of German national unity in the poem, in her reading of *Der Dräumling*, Fiedler argues that Raabe uses irony and comedic elements to offer a critique of the German search for national identity by reassessing the Schiller Festival in the light of the German unification in 1871. The political potential of literature and culture is thus not only a creative force that can border on propaganda; it can also be used to wage a powerful critique of politics itself.

The second section of this volume assembles essays that explore fictionalized space or the textual construction of SPACES OF/IN FICTION. The essays also share an interest in postcolonial perspectives and in potential theoretical tools for the analysis of transcultural spaces.

MAHA EL HISSY explores Tayeb Salih's highly acclaimed novel *Season of Migration to the North* from 1967 with respect to colonial legacies that remain part of the geographical and cultural landscape of the Sudan. In her analysis of the Sudanese text, El Hissy engineers reading strategies that are shaped by Derrida's poststructuralism and its impact on postcolonial positions. Her essay particularly explores the concept of "remnants" as a theoretical tool that allows us to understand how traces of colonial history are inscribed in cultural spaces. This ambiguous condition oscillates between past and present, between history and new beginnings. Colonial legacies are thus not overwritten in a postcolonial era, but are rather integrated into new narratives.

BELA GLIGOROVA's essay offers a reading of Spalding Gray's autobiographical theatrical monologue *Swimming to Cambodia* and its film adaptation (1985, 1987). Gligorova's particular interest in Gray's work concerns the cultural position of his monologues between personal and collective experience. *Swimming to Cambodia* recounts Gray's involvement in Roland Joffé's film *The Killing Fields* (1984). The actor's minor role in this major film production is the point of departure for a humoresque tale that negotiates the manner in which individual memory is interwoven with, and can be salvaged from, the wider arena of our collective history. Gligorova's analysis shows how Gray employs the means used in storytelling of "auto/ethnography," parabasis, and contact zones in order to achieve these aims.

KATHLEEN KEIRN's contribution creates a dialogue between Denis Diderot's concept of cosmopolitanism and Michel Foucault's heterotopia to discuss the representation of space in *The Female American*, an anonymously written novel that was first published in 1767. Recounting the adventures of Unca Eliza Winkfield, the offspring of a Native American princess and a wealthy Englishman, *The Female American* is a tale about hybrid and migratory existences. Keirn views the novel as a site that resists national narratives and introduces new approaches to finding a sense of cultural belonging.

LOUISA SÖLLNER's essay discusses cultural texts that can be understood as reflections on the history of the museum and of Western exhibition practices from a postcolonial perspective. She compares Herman Melville's novel *Typee* (1843, 1892) and Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance *Two Undiscovered Amerindians visit the West* (1992) with respect to incidents in which the spatial and communicative organization of exhibitions is violated. Furthermore, Söllner argues that such violations enable us to envision transformations in exhibition practices while gaining a new understanding of the function and history of the museum.

The third section focuses on IRONY AND FICTION. The two essays here explore different uses of irony as an aesthetic technique that can negotiate the relationship between fiction and reality. While certain forms of irony can create a sense of detachment and distance that allows fiction to approach reality from an autonomous critical perspective, irony can also bridge that gap and create a sense of connectedness and groundedness.

ANDREW ALLEN's reading of Dave Eggers' creative memoir *A Heart-breaking Work of Staggering Genius* examines the use of proximal irony, meta-irony, and postirony as techniques used by the author to convince his readers to give up their ironic distance and let themselves experience sincere, genuine emotion. Eggers' approach to irony in his creative memoir, Allen argues, emerges from a perceived crisis felt by younger American writers who are attempting to escape the destabilizing use of irony that borders on cynicism in the works of their postmodern predecessors. Allen shows in his essay how, by applying new techniques of irony, Eggers manages to bridge the gap between cynical distance and detachment either by creating a feeling of closeness and intimacy (proximal irony), preventing the ironic distance of an ironic or critical reading (meta-irony), or by blurring the distinction between irony and sincerity (postirony).

REINHARD MÖLLER's essay revisits Kierkegaard's philosophy of irony, exploring the concept of controlled irony introduced by Kierkegaard as a counter-model to Romantic irony. Focusing on selected passages from Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* (1841), Möller demonstrates that Kierkegaard envisioned irony as a self-critical medium that helps to cultivate a skepticism toward reality, while at the same time restricting the impulses toward fictionalization that could jeopardize a subject's ties to reality.



## Acknowledgements

Many of the contributions assembled in this volume are based on discussions that took place during two weeks in August in 2010, when a group of young scholars from different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds grappled with the theme “Fictionalizing the World?” at the international summer school hosted by ProLit, a PhD program in Literature at LMU Munich (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München). The 2010 program was the third and last in a summer school series titled “Fiction and Reality.” The first installment that took place in 2008 was themed “Resisting Texts” and it was followed by the second in 2009 with the theme “New Forms of Fiction.” The results of the first two summer schools are documented in two essay collections that were published in 2011. We are glad now to present this volume as the result of the last summer school.

The “Fiction and Reality” series was generously funded by the German Academic Exchange Service DAAD and the Munich University Society (Münchener Universitätsgesellschaft). We are very grateful to both institutions for their support.

Our sincere gratitude goes to ProLit coordinator Markus Wiefarn for organizing the 2010 event. We would also like to thank the former coordinator of the program, Brigitte Rath, who was the mind behind the whole summer school series and without whose initiative, energy, and dedication, the program that inspired this volume would not have been possible. We are grateful to Norbert Schürer and Maha El Hissy for their input and advice in the early stages of the editing process and to Michelle Miles for her help in copyediting the essays. Finally, we also want to thank ProLit for bringing all of the participants of this volume together and for the assistance with this publication.

*Munich, August 2015*

*Louisa Söllner and Anita Vržina*



