European Centers and Peripheries in the Political Novel

When analyzing asymmetries between centers, semi-peripheries, and peripheries, literary scholars draw on various theoretical and methodological traditions. This collection of working papers aims to put special emphasis on examining Europe as a combined and uneven formation characterized by economic, social, cultural, and literary asymmetries. The papers investigate the question of what formal and textual features are common, if not typical, of literary capitals (centers) on the one hand and margins and peripheries on the other.

Audience: Scholars • Teachers and educators • Students • Artists

Curated by

Caponeu Team Member

Kyung-Ho Cha

Kyung-Ho Cha, Ivana Perica, Aurore Peyroles, Christoph Schaub: European Centers and Peripheries in the Political Novel

When analyzing asymmetries between centers, semi-peripheries, and peripheries, literary scholars draw on various theoretical and methodological traditions, such as post- and decolonial approaches or, as, for example the Warwick Research Collective (2015), world-systems analysis. Some of these literary scholars rather emphasize asymmetries and exchanges between (the) European center(s) and non-European (semi-)peripheries, while paying less attention to how global economic centers such as Europe – whatever its boundaries may be – are marked by internal center-periphery-dynamics (e.g., between Germany, or France, and Eastern Europe). Additionally, sociological approaches in world literature studies (e.g., Casanova 2004; Moretti 1998, 2000) focus on examining center-periphery dynamics in literary fields, or systems, and highlight how these dynamics influence literary form. They supplement approaches that analyze how specific literary texts represent center-periphery-asymmetries.

Alina Bako: Semi-peripheral Nodes and the Circulation of Political Ideas. The

Case of a Romanian Novel

This study is based on the observation that political ideas circulating in Romanian society are reflected in Romanian literature, offering a critical analysis that contributes to a more documentary understanding of the current situation. Furthermore, spatial representations have established a coherent framework for the development and explanation of the ideology that has shaped literary characters, presenting subtle, and at times grotesque or caricatured, masks of political figures from the era. For this research, we propose a brief analysis based on the Warwick Research Collective's theory of “Combined and Uneven Development,” (WRS 2015, 32) highlighting the evident relationships within the Romanian context that have shaped the literature of the early century and beyond.

Working Paper

“Semi-peripheral Nodes and the Circulation of Political Ideas. The Case of a Romanian Novel” & “Uneven and Combined Development in the Centre of Modernism: Beckett, Joyce, London and Dublin. Response"

By: Alina Bako, Paul Stewart

Paul Stewart: Response to Alina Bako: “Semi-peripheral Nodes and the Circulation of Political Ideas. The Case of a Romanian Novel”

In this response to this Alina Bako’s overview of uneven and combined development within the modern literary scene of Romania, I merely want to pull out a few threads and, in combination with the Warwick Research Collective’s thinking, consider unevenness within works that might seem central to modernism but which are also inflected by postcolonial paradigms. By so doing I hope to tease out how the experience of inter-European colonialism might feature in a consideration of the political novel.

Working Paper

“Semi-peripheral Nodes and the Circulation of Political Ideas. The Case of a Romanian Novel” & “Uneven and Combined Development in the Centre of Modernism: Beckett, Joyce, London and Dublin. Response"

By: Alina Bako, Paul Stewart

Charles Sabatos: Reimagining Political

Peripheries in Pišťanek’s and Boldizar’s Siberian Slovakia

This article explores how Peter Pišťanek and Alexander Boldizar reimagine Slovak identity through fictional Siberian settings that reflect post-Communist dislocation and postcolonial themes. Pišťanek’s "The End of Freddy" satirically relocates Slovaks to the Arctic archipelago of Junja, critiquing nationalism, capitalism, and Czech-Slovak tensions. Boldizar’s "The Ugly" portrays a Siberian tribe descended from Slovak legionnaires, confronting neocolonial incursions and legal absurdities. Drawing on David Chioni Moore’s comparison of post-Soviet and postcolonial frameworks, both authors displace Slovakia’s political and cultural anxieties onto remote frontiers. Through grotesque humor, linguistic parody, and imagined sovereignties, their works challenge Cold War binaries and reflect broader critiques of global power, exile, and uneven development. Together, they offer a unique literary lens on the peripherality of Central Europe in the aftermath of socialism and empire.

Working Paper

“Reimagining Political Peripheries in Pišťanek’s and Boldizar’s Siberian Slovakia” & “Response”

By: Charles Sabatos, Nina Weller

Nina Weller: Response to Charles Sabatos: “Reimagining Political Peripheries in Pišťanek’s and Boldizar’s Siberian Slovakia”

In his paper, Charles Sabatos gave a highly interesting insight into two of the most important novels in the field of Slovakian literature of the last three decades: "The Rivers of Babylon" (1991) by Peter Pišťanek (1960-2015) and "The Ugly" (2016) by the Canadian-Slovakian author Alexander Boldizar (*1971). These novels deal directly or indirectly through literary satire with the question of the relationship between the small country of Slovakia and its larger, more powerful neighbours, with the question of the postcolonial relationship between East and West and the underlying stereotypes of dominant and subordinate perspectives and power structures.

Working Paper

“Reimagining Political Peripheries in Pišťanek’s and Boldizar’s Siberian Slovakia” & “Response”

By: Charles Sabatos, Nina Weller

Mónika Dánél: Poetical Decomposition

of the Embodied Dictatorial Legacy. Transborder Hungarian Literature and Multilingual Minority Self-awareness

This essay explores the concept of multilingual minority through Hungarian and Romanian novels addressing the 1989 regime change in Eastern Europe. Focusing on transborder Hungarian literature, the study analyzes how linguistic hybridity and cultural entanglement deconstruct national literary canons shaped by methodological nationalism. Using works by authors such as Andrea Tompa and Dumitru Țepeneag, it argues that literary narratives serve as multilingual spaces of memory, where ideological legacies are poetically dismantled. Andrea Tompa's "The Hangman's House" exemplifies how multilingualism and embodied memory challenge dictatorial inscriptions through poetic form and linguistic interplay. By treating the 1989 events as shared yet fragmented experiences, these Bildungsroman-like narratives foreground personal and generational processes of cultural decomposition and reconfiguration. Literature thus becomes a space for reclaiming agency through accent, memory, and language amid historical rupture.

Working Paper

"Multilingual Minority: Poetical Decomposition of the Embodied Dictatorial Legacy" & "Entrapment and Resistance. Language and Power in Andrea Tompa's 'The Hangman's House'. Response"

By: Mónika Dánél, Philipp Wegmann

Philipp Wegmann: Response to Mónika Dánél: "Multilingual Minority: Poetical Decomposition of the Embodied Dictatorial Legacy"

The theme of 'entrapment' lies at the heart of Andrea Tompa's "The Hangman's House" (2010, rev. 2015, translated into English in 2021), but it also encapsulates a defining characteristic of the 'political novel' as a genre – that consistently interrogates the ideological, social, and linguistic forces that constrain both individuals and communities. In Tompa's text, the entrapment extends far beyond the political, emerging not only through oppressive political regimes but also through the constraints imposed by one's native tongue, and the broader cultural-linguistic frameworks that define and confine individual and collective existence. The exploration of the individual's relationship to language – whether native or state-mandated – serves as a central motif, where marginalized local languages and cultures intersect with dominant official languages, reflecting the individual's relationship with the collective and, ultimately, broader center-periphery dynamics.

Working Paper

"Multilingual Minority: Poetical Decomposition of the Embodied

Dictatorial Legacy” & “Entrapment and Resistance. Language and Power in Andrea Tompa’s 'The Hangman’s House'. Response”

By: Mónika Dánél, Philipp Wegmann

Alexandra Irimia: Bureaucracies of Memory: Institutionalized History in Four Contemporary European Novels

This article examines how four contemporary European novels—"Time Shelter" (Gospodinov), "The Capital" (Menasse), "Les Émotions" (Toussaint), and "The Censor’s Notebook" (Corobca)—engage with the bureaucratization of memory and institutionalized history. Focusing on themes of nostalgia, trauma, and administrative absurdity, the study contrasts Eastern and Western European approaches to the bureaucratic novel. It highlights how Eastern narratives often invent speculative institutions (e.g., censorship lodges, memory clinics) while Western ones critique existing EU structures. Drawing on theories of literary polysystems and world-literature, the article explores the center-periphery dynamics of cultural capital, translation, and linguistic power. It argues that bureaucratic fiction from Europe’s peripheries critically reconfigures national and transnational identities, especially when translated into English. Ultimately, these novels reveal how literature navigates institutional memory, multilingualism, and political representation in a fragmented and unequal European literary space.

Working Paper

“Bureaucracies of Memory. Institutionalized History in Four Contemporary European Novels” & “Response”

By: Alexandra Irimia, Stephen Shapiro

Brînduşa Nicolaescu: A Political Novel between the Periphery and the Center: Norman Manea’s Plicul negru (1986) / The Black Envelope (1995)

This study explores Norman Manea’s "The Black Envelope" (1986), a politically charged novel written under Romania’s communist regime and later rewritten in exile. Often overshadowed by Manea’s better-known works, this novel encapsulates the dual pressures of state censorship and internalized self-censorship. The analysis traces its publication history—from its heavily censored initial edition to its revised post-exile versions—and reveals how Manea preserved subversive content through metaphor, irony, and narrative ambiguity. Drawing on the original censor’s report and subsequent revisions, the essay highlights the writer’s resistance to ideological control and his complex negotiation of truth and artistic freedom. Manea’s aesthetic strategy of "writing between the

lines" illustrates the broader tension between literature and authoritarianism, and underscores the ethical mission of fiction in totalitarian societies, where the act of writing becomes both a political and existential defiance.

Working Paper

“A Political Novel between the Periphery and the Center: Norman Manea’s 'Plicul negru' (1986) / 'The Black Envelope' (1995)” & “Response”

By: Brînduşa Nicolaescu, Natalya Bekhta

Natalya Bekhta: Response to Brînduşa Nicolaescu

I would like to make two points in my response. One of them pertains to the question of the political novel more generally and the second point is a comparative one. While I’m not familiar with contemporary Romanian literature, from Brînduşa’s paper I see very interesting comparative parallels that can be drawn to the case of Ukrainian literature. To read Ukrainian literature, and Romanian it seems to me, in a comparative context and in translation requires a lot of explanation of the context – of politics, of movements, of literary field, of the language games, active in a particular historical moment, and so on. I recognize this in Norman Manea’s "The Black Envelope", even if I don’t understand a lot of allusions.

Working Paper

“A Political Novel between the Periphery and the Center: Norman Manea’s 'Plicul negru' (1986) / 'The Black Envelope' (1995)” & “Response”

By: Brînduşa Nicolaescu, Natalya Bekhta

Stefan Segi: Vlastimil Vondruška and the Inevitable Demise of Europe

The aim of this paper is to analyse Vlastimil Vondruška’s novel "The Chronicle of the demise of Europe" (2019) in the context of Milan Kundera’s concept of Central Europe. This comparison will allow us to understand the context and temporality of Vondruska’s vision of Europe’s decline and Central European specificities. We will then try to situate Vondruška’s work in the political and cultural reality of the Czech Republic and Central Europe.

Working Paper

“Vlastimil Vondruška and the Inevitable Demise of Europe” and “Being East European (from a Polish perspective). Response”

By: Stefan Segi, Błażej Warkocki

Błażej Warkocki: Response to Stefan Segi. Being East European (from a Polish perspective)

My response concerned a paper on the work of the Czech writer Vlastimil Vondruška and the discourse of ‘political correctness’. In my response, I tried to outline how the concept of political correctness was used in Polish political novels written by right-wing writers and journalists (Bronislaw Wildstein, Rafał Ziemkiewicz, Paweł Lisicki). I’m trying to compare the Czech situation with the Polish one, because here one can find many right-wing populist political novels. Perhaps even the majority of Polish political novels written since 1989 can be labelled this way.

Working Paper

“Vlastimil Vondruška and the Inevitable Demise of Europe” and “Being East European (from a Polish perspective). Response”

By: Stefan Segi, Błażej Warkocki

Kyung-Ho Cha, Ivana Perica, Aurore Peyroles, and Christoph Schaub, eds. 2025. European Centers and Peripheries in the Political Novel (Caponeu Working Papers),

When analyzing asymmetries between centers, semi-peripheries, and peripheries, literary scholars draw on various theoretical and methodological traditions. This collection of working papers aims to put special emphasis on examining Europe as a combined and uneven formation characterized by economic, social, cultural, and literary asymmetries. The papers investigate the question of what formal and textual features are common, if not typical, of literary capitals (centers) on the one hand and margins and peripheries on the other.

Working Paper Collection

European Centers and Peripheries in the Political Novel (Caponeu Working Papers)

By: Kyung-Ho Cha, Ivana Perica, Aurore Peyroles, Christoph Schaub