

Sally Booth and Jeffrey Cole comment on:

"Minority Literature and the Discourse of Integration: The Case of Deutsch als Fremdsprache in the 1970s and 1980s West Germany"

Paper prepared by Rita Chin for the conference "History-Migration-Anthropology: New Perspectives on Migration and Migration History," Erfurt, Germany, November 2002

Chin offers a nuanced and interesting case study of initiatives aimed at integrating "guest workers" in West Germany in the 1970s-80s. In particular, the article analyzes the genesis, development, and significance of the important Munich Institute.

The Institute was established in 1978. Associated with the University of Munich, and drawing on funding from the German Academic Exchange and the Goethe Institute, it represented an important effort on the part of the German academic establishment to come to terms with the reality of long-term immigrant communities. The Institute broke new ground by integrating the study of German as a second language with literary expression by non-Germans. The leadership of the Institute conceived of integration as a dialogue: immigrants, by writing in German, would take an active, creative role in the culture of their host country at the same time that the German reading public would be

able to appreciate the diversity within its midst and be the better for it.

As Chin describes, the Institute played a prominent role in a broader integration effort. In particular, it accomplished this aim through a series of influential anthologies put out by major publishing houses, and by the establishment in 1985 of the Chamisso Prize for literary efforts in German written by non-native speakers. Awards went to writers with diverse backgrounds, styles, and views regarding the place of foreigners and the desirability and mode of integration. Overall, however, the prize honored literary expressions of "linguistic hybridity and divided identities" and it promoted these "liminal" figures as spokespeople for the integration effort. Chin is careful to trace the ambiguities and complexities of the institutionalization of immigrant literature. At some level the prize legitimated the binary pair of suffering immigrant writer and empathetic German reader. The authors' works embodied a German-Other distinction at the same time that they dissolved it. In the judgment of Institute academic director Irmgard Ackermann, foreigner literature constituted "an exceptional document of integration" in both the linguistic and cultural senses. The integration project, as Chin notes, was ultimately

limited. The Institute's work did offer individual writers notoriety; it also granted institutional recognition of the cultural work of foreigners. But contemporary citizenship laws excluded virtually all foreigners from full participation in German society.

Chin makes a convincing argument that debate on integration in Germany is not novel but rather "as old as labor migration itself." She places the case study within the context of the 1970s when intellectuals and political parties grasped the irreversible nature of what they had previously described as the temporary residence of "guest workers." The ruling Social Democrats, in particular, defined integration as an accommodation on the part of both German society and immigrant populations.

This fine case study reminds us that western European governments have long espoused official policies (as diverse as they might be) of integration with regard to immigrant populations. It also makes us think of the ongoing and important cultural production by immigrants and their children elsewhere in Europe, such as "beur" writing and music in France, Cape Verdean music in Portugal, and Reggae, hip hop, and other musical forms in England. How does the German case compare and contrast other European examples? In her discussion of Deleuze and Guattari's

views of the characteristics of what they label "minor literature," Chin does acknowledge a broader debate on immigrant and minority literature. These authors note that immigrant and minority writers can jostle received assumptions regarding language, culture, and populations. But she rightly rejects their sweeping generalizations regarding the radical potential of immigrant literature. The comparative potential of the Institute, however, hinges not on immigrant or minority writers per se but rather on their state-sponsored legitimization through prizes, scholarships, subventions, and the like. Considering the case of the Institute, it would be interesting to learn (1) to what extent other governments have, and have not, promoted integration through the institutional valorization of art and (2) what patterns, if any, emerge from different state policies and cultural traditions.