Migrations and Nations: Historical Perspectives on Current Border Crossings

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Abstract
In this keynote address, I discuss how historians can inform current public debates and how these debates in turn shape the research of historians. As a historian of migration, I argue for doing three things in the way we participate in public discussions and how we go about our research. Firstly, we should apply a long-term perspective when contributing to the public and academic discourse. Secondly, by stepping outside of the «container» of the nation, we can follow a transnational approach, and thirdly, we ought to follow an immigrant-centered perspective. In the first empirical case that follows, I delineate the history of the U.S.-Mexico border. The second case provides insight into the public discussion of migration in Switzerland.

Keywords
migration, historiography, methodology, USA, Switzerland

I would like to thank the members of the committee for giving me the opportunity to speak here today. They asked us speakers to think about how history can inform debates. They also asked us to think about how our roles as historians standing in the public eye inform our research. Because I have written about the U.S. and Switzerland and lived in both places, these two countries constitute the main geographical, historiographical, and political sites of my argument.

Nations and borders are experiencing a renaissance. The end of the Cold War had ushered in a period of globalization through intensified circulations of money, products, and people. Now rhetoric of and actions such as the closing of borders, the raising of fences and walls, and the imposition of tariffs coincide with a global resurgence of nationalism. Migration has taken on a central role in public debates on national sovereignty and identity, while setting the agenda for many elections. Images of refugees trudging across European landmasses, and of overloaded rickety boats capsizing in the Mediterranean have flickered across TV screens. Even in academia, we can detect a growing skepticism toward transnational and global history. There are signs of a renewed national turn within the discipline of history.

1. For a critical reading of this text, I would like to thank Corinne Pernet, Natalie Avanzino, Barbara Holler, and Antoine Acker.
2. This speech was presented as a keynote lecture at the «Norske historiedager 2018» at the University of Agder in Kristiansand, Norway. Some smaller changes were made to the speech for the purpose of publication.
3. The members of the committee that organized the Norwegian history conference at the University of Agder.
Overview of the Lecture
The renationalization of the political arena, in tandem with the academic, gives proof of the porous borders between the two spheres. This means that when I discuss what it means to be a historian in society, I try not to lose sight of the fact that even by working at my desk in the lonesomeness of my office, I am a historian in society. The following talk thus delineates the nexus between the academic and the public sphere.

At the core, I will plead we do three things as migration historians – both in the way that we participate in public discussions and in the way we conduct our research. First, we need to rely on our long-term perspective, as Jo Guldi and David Armitage argue, that efficiently deconstructs stereotypical notions in public discourses. Second, I argue that it is crucial for migration historians to step outside the «container» of the nation and to analyze issues from a transnational perspective. Third, we must also challenge public and academic renationalization by integrating what Donna Gabaccia calls an «immigrant-centered perspective» into our endeavors.

I am dividing the speech in two sections: in the first, I would like to apply the transnational approach to the history of the U.S.-Mexico border. I will trace how the movement of people became illegal in the 20th century. I begin with the case of the U.S.-Mexico border because I think it could be helpful to go beyond the European perspective. In Europe, we sometimes get so wrapped up in our national and European migration phenomena that we lose sight of the fact that the history of migration in other areas of the world can produce similar patterns and raise comparable questions. In the second part, I discuss the public discourse on migration in the case of Switzerland.

A Brief History of the U.S.-Mexico Border and Illegality
In the last U.S. presidential election, 70 percent of registered voters considered migration to be a «very important» issue. The presidential candidate for the Republican Party, in particular, focused rhetorically on the U.S.-Mexico border. The promise of building a wall along this border, which the Mexican government would finance, became a central ingredient to his campaign. The wall would curb so-called illegal immigration by putting a stop to people crossing over the border beyond official entry points.

As historians, let us go back in time and trace the history of this «line in the sand» while questioning the concepts that in current debates are simply taken for granted: How have «illegality», the «border», and «movements» across the border been conceptualized and lived in the past? I will do this with some broad brushstrokes.

Almost 200 years ago, Mexicans living in what currently is Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, California, and Texas were not considered troublesome subjects because they lived in what was then Mexico. Their territories were brought into the United States only as a result of the annexation of Texas in 1845 and the ensuing Mexican-American war (1846 to 1848). The U.S. won the war. Essentially, the border shifted under the feet of the...
Mexican residents and they received U.S. citizenship.\(^{12}\) Today’s immigrant rights’ movement has turned this history into a rallying cry: «We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.»\(^{13}\)

This event of a migratory boundary reverberates in the U.S. Southwest up to this day. It can explain some of the staunch differences in immigration policy between the neighboring states of Arizona and New Mexico. At the time of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which brought an end to the Mexican-American war and would redraw the map between Mexico and the U.S., more Mexicans were living in the area that is now the state of New Mexico than in the territory that would become Arizona. In the late 19th century, federal legislation encouraged white settlers, so-called Anglos, to move to Arizona where they would build a political stronghold. For a long time in New Mexico, Hispanos were the majority and were able to develop political power that they still hold in the present. This can explain why New Mexico today is more welcoming toward Spanish-speaking immigrants than Arizona. Robin Dale Jacobson, Daniel Tichenor, and T. Elizabeth Durden caution us to conclude, however, that throughout its history New Mexico followed a pro-immigration stance to all groups. For example, the Hispano-Anglo coalition stemmed the immigration of new Europeans, such as Italians and of Japanese in the first half of the 20th century.\(^{14}\)

The historian Rachel St. John illuminates how the new border first existed only as the result of the treaty. It then needed to be mapped in detail and implemented by surveyors on the ground. In 1849, both the U.S. and Mexican governments nominated appointees to the Joint United States and Mexican Boundary Commission. This commission set out to complete the task of making facts on the ground: This difficult endeavor took seven years. It was drawn out by challenging climatic conditions, a rough environment, and deteriorating health of the groups’ personnel. Additionally, the members of the commission had to deal with imprecise information because the border thus far only existed in the minds of the treaty makers. It did not necessarily correspond with the actual landscape. This resulted in confusion and eventually in a redrawing of parts of the boundary lines.\(^{15}\) However, the imposition of the border did not coincide with military authority of the U.S. and Mexican states over it. The Apaches, for instance, did not respect the line in the sand, and their raids led them zigzagging across the border.\(^{16}\) It took the joint effort of Mexican and U.S. military across national lines to establish state sovereignty against Apaches who had long been in control of the borderlands.\(^{17}\) The phenomenon of binational cooperation over a shared boundary would repeat itself in the future.\(^{18}\)

The first fence that the U.S. government installed was meant to stop diseased cattle from crossing the border.\(^{19}\) The first racialized group whose movement across the U.S.-Mexico border was made illegal and consequently monitored, was Chinese laborers. The Chinese laborers attempted to enter the U.S. through Mexico as they were barred from entry in 1882

\(^{12}\) Number of affected Mexicans in Southwest is between 75 000 and 100 000. See Gutiérrez 1995: 13.  
\(^{13}\) Cisneros 2013: 1.  
\(^{14}\) Jacobson, Tichenor, and Durden 2018.  
\(^{15}\) St. John 2011: 22f.  
\(^{16}\) St. John 2011: 38f.  
\(^{17}\) St. John 2011: 40, 57-59.  
\(^{18}\) St. John 2011: 39f.  
\(^{19}\) St. John 2011: 203.
(Chinese Exclusion Act). In 1924, the U.S. Congress massively capped European migration and thereby turned entering into the U.S., especially for Southern and Eastern Europeans, into an illegal act. Social Darwinism and eugenic rhetoric drove the discourse on immigration restriction. Moreover, the U.S. industrial economy’s thirst for cheap labor had been quenched.

However, this was not true for the agricultural sector, which attracted mainly Mexican workers, especially after Asian and European migration had been curtailed. The need for agricultural workers explains why customs officers applied literacy tests and an eight-dollar head tax rather lady to Mexican migrants, as the historian George Sánchez states. Aviva Chomsky argues that U.S. Congress did not see Mexicans as immigrants who would settle in the U.S. permanently, but as temporary workers, and therefore did not regulate their movements as strictly. Indeed, Mexican men, mainly, followed a transnational circulation pattern across the border depending primarily on labor needs in the U.S. In general, Mexican citizens could move more or less freely across the border until the 1920s, at which point the modern border control was well established.

Considering this history of free Mexican movement, the historian Mae Ngai states: “It was ironic that Mexicans became so associated with illegal immigration.” So what happened exactly? When and why did Mexicans crossing the border become illegal? In general, the post-World War I era marks a period of heightened nationalism, the introduction of widespread use of passports, and immigration control. It is during this time that the so-called illegal alien emerged as a broader phenomenon in the United States. The 1924 Act had implemented visa fees of ten dollars, which became a financial burden to many Mexican laborers. The growing bureaucratization at the border created long waiting times for crossings; some even had to wait for weeks before being admitted for border inspections. Not least, Mexicans were increasingly confronted with racism, which manifested itself in degrading physical border inspections that had been introduced in 1917. Under those new circumstances, many Mexicans sought entry outside of official border stations and became illegal. Thus, the transnational, circulatory life of Mexicans became criminal. Not surprisingly, it was during the Great Depression, which sent people scrambling for jobs, when anti-Mexican sentiment reached its preliminary pinnacle and found an outlet in massive repatriations. The racialized association between Mexicans and “illegal migration” that materialized in the 1920s resulted in detrimental consequences in the 1930s. In some cases, the authorities decided on expulsion based on complexion and looks rather than citi-

20. Lee 2003: 165-200; The first «Chinese inspectors» to patrol the border were introduced in 1904. However, Hirota argues that in New York and Massachusetts poor Irish were the first racialized group to be denied entrance to and deported from the United States: Hirota 2017.
zenship status. Indeed, many of the Mexican deportees had U.S. citizenship, but it did not protect them.33 Another effect of this racialization was, as Mae Ngai illuminates, that «[…] walking (or wading) across the border emerged as the quintessential act of illegal immigration […]».34

The border had become a tool with which the U.S. could adjust migration according to their labor needs and xenophobic public opinion.35 As the economic tides turned during World War II, U.S. labor needs reinstalled the rotary seasonal labor from Mexico that went back to the early 1900s. Despite the Mexican government’s concerns regarding the treatment of its citizens in the U.S., it signed the so-called Bracero program.36 Between 1942 and 1964, 4.5 Million Bracero contracts were signed, representing about 2 million workers since many Braceros returned to the U.S. several times.37 But the dawn of the civil rights era of the 1960s had ambivalent consequences: The 1924 immigration system was overhauled in 1965 because it was racist.38 At the same time, the Bracero program was terminated because it was considered exploitative.39 Under the new 1965 immigration law, every country received the same immigration quota and for the first time immigration from the so-called Western Hemisphere, of which Mexico is a part, was numerically capped. This new 1965 law had unintended outcomes:40 it pushed more Mexicans to unauthorized border crossings. Just think: the new quota allowed for 120 000 entries of the Western Hemisphere – made up of Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean – annually.41 The Bracero program with Mexico alone would have taken up about double the annual quota.

Here we have the origin of the current U.S. illegal migration problem. Many of the people who had come as Braceros, and wanted to continue to do so, were forced to enter illegally – and the farmers continued to hire them, but this time as illegal workers.42 Thus, the circulation of Mexican workers continued, as had been the case for much of the 20th century, but almost from one moment to the next this work migration had been made illegal.43 Between 1965 and 1985, the seasonal tours of workers proceeded illegally, also because the border was quite open. In 1986, a new immigration law,44 known as the Reagan Amnesty, legalized the status of almost 2 million residents45 while intensifying controls at the border. The Reagan Amnesty had the opposite effect than that intended: the population without official documents grew in the 1980s and 1990s.46 Why? Because those who received permanent residency status could emancipate themselves from the most destitute corners of the U.S. labor market and move into more protected and better paying jobs. At the same time, demand for cheap labor increased.47 This means that new groups of undocumented workers

34. Ngai 2004: 89.
38. Known as the Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965, see: Chomsky 2014: 59f.
42. Chomsky 2014: 11f., 60. Chomsky points out how in this period, Europe legalized its guest workers, see Chomsky 2014: 60.
44. Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA).
entered the country, but they abandoned the historically seasonal transnational migration. They stayed and in some cases had their families follow them because between 1985 and 2000, the U.S. government militarized the border and circular migration became too dangerous.48 As of 2016 there were 11 million undocumented people residing in the United States,49 half of which were Mexican.50 Since the Great Recession of 2008, more Mexicans returned to Mexico than entered the United States. However, the agency of migrants cannot merely be subsumed under economic rationalizations. Personal attachments to family and place of birth influence the movement of people, too.51 A survey by the Mexican government showed that many of return migrants said the reason for their return was to reunite with family.52

Conclusions Drawn from the History of the Mexico-U.S. Border

What I hope to do at public events on migration history or in the media is to undermine preconceived notions, stereotypical thinking, or false information, all of which are maladies of controversial topics while also trying to complicate current debates. Of course, it is hard to communicate research that is at times conflicting, yet always dynamic in the age of sound bites. Nevertheless, historians have the tools to add fresh perspectives that talking heads in the media often neglect.

A central approach that I used in the almost 200-year framework of the U.S.-Mexico border beyond the transnational perspective is the historians’ long-term perspective, which fights society’s short-term memory. Even though migration historians fight over theories, empirical data, and interpretations, one thing is clear: People, animals, plants, pathogens, things, and ideas move. In Europe, the public treats migration as a story of exception, when in fact it is one of the basic stories of human life. In the collective memory of Switzerland, where migration has been one of the key political issues of the last 20 years, the fact is downplayed that Switzerland experienced mass emigration in the 19th century,53 and of course so did Norway.54 In the case of the Mexico-U.S. border crossings, the long-term perspective showed: Illegality is a category that resulted from historically contingent migratory, political, and economic systems, personal, and political interests, and also unintended consequences. Transnational movements across the border that went on for decades could be legal in one instance, and illegal in the next. Additionally, the image of people walking across the border as the source of illegal immigration stems, as mentioned, from the 1920s, yet still lingers over today’s policy discussions, even though in 2016 more than half of all cases of illegality resulted from overstayed visas.55 The long-term perspective also denaturalizes the border. The Mexico-U.S. demarcation was never natural; it had to be made over time in a messy, arbitrary, confusing, and sometimes violent way. And what followed was not automatic state sovereignty over the border territory; it too needed to be established by joint Mexican and U.S. forces.56 The historian Keren Weitzberg likens the U.S.-Mexico border

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52. Gonzalez-Barrera 2015.
to postcolonial borders in Africa: «All too often, Africa’s political conflicts are blamed on the ‘arbitrary’ nature of its borders. Products of 19th-century European colonialism, most African national boundaries were drawn with little regard for African communities. Many scholars and policymakers have come to see them as artificial — and uniquely flawed — constructs. But rarely do we hear the legitimacy of the Mexico-U.S. border called into question in American policy debates.»

As historians, we can point out that Americans did not respect the Northern Mexican border and Mexican sovereignty in 1846 in order to counter claims of immigrants today disrespecting the border. The historical example demonstrates that in the aftermath of a war that had established an imaginary line on a map, it was the transnational cooperation of surveyors, cartographers, and the military that made the border. These two countries, thus, literally share a border. In other words, nations, even powerful ones, are interwoven with other nations and to a varying degree depend on each other.

Many Native Americans today question the legitimacy of the borders across the Americas in public debates. Consequently, many of them are visible supporters of the American Dreamers, who are fighting for a legal way to remain in the U.S. The American Dreamers are undocumented – or illegal – migrants who had arrived in the U.S. together with their parents when they were underage. Their future in the U.S. is uncertain. As historians, we can then make sense of current American Indian support of immigrants as this echoes the history of Apaches, who remained unimpressed by the border in the mid-1800s. The contextualization through a long-term perspective of this knowledge in public debate could illuminate individuals’ or groups’ behaviors. A *longue durée* approach of current issue thus could perhaps reshape debates.

**Chances and Challenges for Public Participation: The Swiss Case**

I would like to switch our focus back to Europe, and in particular, look at the Swiss case. In the following section, I am less interested in developing a historical example. Instead, I will remain on the level of the public discourse and discuss how historians could intervene in public debates. In public, Swiss history is lively and controversially discussed. It is a site where historians and politicians negotiate interpretational sovereignty over the past, and thereby fight over the current and future Swiss identity. As I have thus far commented on U.S. history in general on national Swiss TV, and not on Swiss history, there has been little controversy because from a Swiss perspective, U.S. history is exotic. However, I collaborate with other historians who reinforce the relocation of Swiss history within a transnational or global framework, which emphasizes Swiss society’s long history of transnational economic, social, and cultural entanglement. This transnational history, together with a *longue durée* approach, mark my starting point with which I aim to intervene in public migration debates: If one goes far back enough, everybody is from somewhere else. Even the most rural central Swiss originally stem from somewhere. Early Swiss mythology traces its roots to migrants from Sweden, which finally gives the confusion between Sweden and Switzer-

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60. Lyons 2018.
land a quasi-scientific foundation.\textsuperscript{64} Thus, as André Holenstein and others most recently phrased, «Swiss history is migration history […]»\textsuperscript{65} Yet, Switzerland as a nation does not define itself through migration. Instead, some politicians conjure up an idea of Switzerland as the country of «local» farmers who have lived in this country for generations. This idea of a farming nation appeals to the public, which in 2015 voted, proportionally speaking, many more farmers into the large chamber of the legislative branch than exist in the general population.\textsuperscript{66} When it comes to migration, there is a split between public consciousness and private experience. Because privately, most people know and even are proud of their, let’s say, Austrian grandmother who worked as a maid for a bourgeois Zurich family, but then publicly celebrate a national image of the independent, Swiss pastoral tribe. The idea could be to nudge the public consciousness into a nation of migrants.\textsuperscript{67} The fact is that 25 percent of the population living in Switzerland has foreign citizenship.\textsuperscript{68} And almost 40 percent of the population has a so-called «migration background».\textsuperscript{69} Yet, the nationality and sometimes even the «migration background» of a person is mainly mentioned in public when she or he has committed a crime. As a result, criminality and migration as categories become cognitively connected. To counteract this, historians and journalists should more often lay open the migration background of someone who has written a book, or of somebody who has, let’s say, an opinion on the redirecting of the bike trail in front of their summer cottage. We could also point out that many more Swiss citizens left Switzerland in 2016 than returned.\textsuperscript{70} Such interventions have the potential to nudge public debate into a new direction, one in which the population is depicted as pluralistic. Concerning this matter, I found the Norwegian TV series «Okkupert», which first aired in 2015, remarkable because of its depiction of society: A diverse Norwegian society is united in their effort to resist a Russian occupation backed by a sneaky European Union.

The challenge that migration historians sometimes face can be that some questions that are relevant in public do not have the same appeal when it comes to research. The fact that Switzerland is a country of migrants is academically well established, and one wishes to engage in research questions beyond this. Nevertheless, sharing one’s research in a public forum gives historians the opportunity not to divorce their interests from possible non-academic readers and further, learn about important topics for future research. I was invited to Berne as one expert among several on migration history.\textsuperscript{71} The event was open to the public and discussions took place within four groups of about 10 to 20 people. I was to speak about the book I wrote on Italian migration to the United States\textsuperscript{72} while engaging in conversation with the participants, some of whom spoke about their own migration histories. In one instance, a retired truck driver had brought pictures of his native Italian village and life in Switzerland. An active dialogue like this benefited both sides: migration history experts and migrants. But I want to refrain from a false dichotomy between migrants on the

\textsuperscript{64} On mythology, Swiss-Swedish confusion, and Swedish heritage see: Holenstein 2018.
\textsuperscript{65} Holenstein et al. 2018: 12; own translation.
\textsuperscript{66} In late 2015, 8 Percent of all the «Nationalräte» (representatives in the large chamber) were farmers. SDA/BLU 2018. In 2014: 1.88 percent of all inhabitants in Switzerland worked in farming; see categories «Landwirtschaft Beschäftigte: 154 000» and «Konsumentinnen und Konsumenten: 8.2 Mio» (inhabitants) see page 4 of Bundesamt für Statistik 2017. For March 2018, the Swiss think tank Avenir Suisse calculated 6.1 percent of all representatives in the entire legislation to be farmers, see Dümmler, P. and Roten, N. 2019.
\textsuperscript{67} Not just immigrants, but also emigrants.
\textsuperscript{68} Bundesamt für Statistik: Bevölkerung in der Schweiz 2016, 2017.
\textsuperscript{69} Bundesamt für Statistik: Bevölkerung in der Schweiz 2016, 2017.
\textsuperscript{70} Bundesamt für Statistik: Bevölkerung in der Schweiz 2016, 2017.
\textsuperscript{71} Living Research Library 2017.
\textsuperscript{72} Wirth 2015.
one side and experts on the other at the event. All of the migrants there were experts in their migration biographies. Some had come from abroad; others had migrated from rural Swiss towns to the cities of Berne, Basel or Zurich. And all of us experts were migrants or children of migrants ourselves.

Migration history was the topic of research for my book: Southern Italians peregrinating to the U.S., Latin America, and back to Europe. In the book, I tried to bring the migrant (and his/her offspring) and expert into dialogue. By conducting oral history interviews, I incorporated the voices of the historical subjects I studied, hoping to illuminate the perspective of the migrants and their children themselves. Their multiple national affiliations can be a foundation upon which a transnational approach is able to evolve and complement a migration historiography that, to a large degree, still focuses on immigration, assimilation, and incorporation of one national identity.

Migrants, their Children, and «Migrant Historians» Contribute to the Debate

The discussion in the media often lacks this immigrant-centered approach. For example, the heated media debate in Germany about migration often forgoes the perspective of recent migrants. The debate is among people speaking about and over the heads of migrants. I hope to counteract this with a shift of perspective in my work. Because what if the migrant is you? One of the early U.S. migration historians who fostered an immigrant-centered epistemology was Theodore Blegen. He taught at the University of Minnesota between the 1940s and 1960s. The University of Minnesota extended higher education to farmers, workers, immigrants and their children of their home state of Minnesota. Blegen contributed central publications to the U.S. migration history canon by writing about Norwegian migration to North America. Blegen and others – what Gabaccia calls Minnesota School proponents – did not get the same attention as the Chicago School sociologists in the 1920s or the private East Coast schools in the 1950s, who traced European peasants assimilating into an urban U.S. society. Blegen was the bilingual son of Norwegian immigrants to the Midwest. He worked out of U.S. and Norwegian archives and followed a transnational methodology a half a century before transnational history became all the rage. It is an awareness of the early Minnesota School and of the underrepresentation of the migrant subjects in the public eye that informs my research.

Conclusion

In Blegen’s spirit, I conclude that a transnational and immigrant-centered approach to the phenomenon of peregrinations provides the migrant historian with a powerful approach to situate oneself as much in as outside of academia. The transnational methodology demonstrates that border crossing is a global phenomenon that proved to be a catalyst of change and conflict throughout the history of humanity. The case of the U.S.-Mexico border, seen

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73. Lengsfeld 2018.
76. Blegen 1917.
77. Gabaccia 2015b.
78. Gabaccia 2015b.
through the lens of the transnational paradigm and analyzed over a long period of time, demonstrates how millions of Mexicans entered the United States without any intention of becoming U.S. citizens. Instead, they lived their transnational lives. In addition, the immigrant-centered approach enables us to see that Mexicans made choices that go beyond the labor markets and the nation state’s migration regimes.81 In the case of Switzerland, I argued that public interventions should rest on the fact that Switzerland is and has been a deeply transnationally entangled nation that has sent and received numerous migrants. I would argue that Europe in general should come to see migration not as an exception, but as a norm. Many of us historians have moved or migrated in the course of our careers, have conducted research in several archives in different towns, and attended conferences beyond our own university. Some of us are labor migrants. We can theorize these experiences by speaking of the «migrant historian», which is based on Edward Said’s idea of the migrant or the traveling academic who «[…] view[s] the academy as a place to voyage in […]».82 I would specify Said’s concept and make a case for «migrant historians» who in their research connect several geographical sites across the borders of areas, territories, states, empires, and nations. Migrant historians can cross over different decades, times, and epochs. They travel within the shoes of the many subjects they study.83 They cross over disciplinary boundaries in their endeavor to combine different areas of knowledge. And last but not least, the migrant historian traverses the academic/public divide by creating knowledge that has relevance to both domains.

Thank you.

Literature


