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# Fictions of Circulation and the Question of World Literature

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The question "what is world literature?" is not a new one, but it is one that has seen considerable debate over the last twenty years. The scholarly discourse around this question has increased in urgency, arguably a result of the increased rhetoric surrounding the many competing notions of globalization. While traditional notions of "world literature" as a canonical body of texts have certainly fallen by the wayside, the answer to this question remains a matter of much dispute. Is world literature a discipline? Is it a methodology? Is it a mode of writing? This special issue makes no claims to provide another new definitive answer to this question; instead, it aims only to suggest ways in which we might complicate the question itself.

In asking the question "what is world literature?" it would be strange not to begin by directly addressing David Damrosch's oft-cited monograph of the same name. In it he breaks from the notion that "world literature" is a canon of texts representing the best of national literature (what he refers to in "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age" as the "Miss Universe" model) to emphasize that it is more a mode of reading with stress on how texts gain through their circulation, namely through translation. Damrosch is not alone in this emphasis on the transmission of texts in the theorizing of world literature. Pascale Casanova's equally influential *The World Republic of Letters* also focuses on the circulation of literature, albeit in what she calls a "world literary space," an aesthetic, critical space disconnected from political-economic systems of circulation. Franco Moretti, in "Conjectures on World Literature," calls literature an "unmistakably a planetary system," and his provocative monographs *Graphs, Maps, and Trees* and the eponymous *Distant Reading* develop a mode of "distant reading" that examines the material conditions of this "planetary" production. Though titled *Against World Literature*, Emily Apter's answer to the question (that there are in fact world literatures) still maintains a focus on literary world systems or "narrative ecosystems." In an effort to disengage from literary studies' long focus on national literatures, driven in part by the desire to distinguish world literature from comparative literature, these and other scholars moved away from the critique of individual texts to focus on larger problems of translation, publication, and distribution on a global scale.

This idea for this issue was born in 2015 with a call for an American Comparative Literature seminar called "Fictions of Circulation." My original proposal asked participants to question this turn towards "distant reading" and the emphasis on networks, systems, and transmission in world literature described above. This focus on how literature moves across boundaries--geographic, linguistic, and cultural--through the process of translation and publication (often on a macro or global scale) is often understood as a rejection of close reading methods. For Moretti, it was quite literally such a rejection, as he wrote, "if you want to look beyond the canon (and of course, world literature will do so: it would be absurd if it didn't!) close reading will not do it" (Moretti, "Conjectures" 57). Such approaches that stress systems and circulation put the emphasis on what happens after the writing of a book, I argued. That seminar focused instead on the idea that texts are often created with the world already in mind. We began from the assumption that authors are well aware of the multiple potential audiences a text may enjoy as well as the processes through which a text may circulate. Our discussion, then, focused on world literature as a mode of writing. The lens for our discussion--our point of departure (or *Ansatzpunkt*, to evoke Auerbach)--was the exploration of what I called "fictions of circulation," or texts that, implicitly or explicitly, acknowledge their position in the literary world.

The essays included here bring very different approaches to bear on how we understand world literature. They all, however, focus on authors who self-consciously explore in their fictions the circulation of texts. In answering the question "what can we learn about the movement of texts from any one particular text?" Meri Wemmerly's "So Long a Letter: Mariama Ba's Migrating Text" illuminates the formal elements of one text to reveal the tensions generated by acknowledging both local and global readerships. In situating the playwright's work within the intersection of performance and his re-interpretation of germ theory, Marianne DiQuattro's "Antonin Artaud--Vector" reminds us to consider the embodied author in the transmission of texts. In "Cultivating Anti-Oppressive Ethics: A Community-Grounded Reading of Caryl Phillips and J.M. Coetzee," Svetlana Stefanova draws on the notion of "imagined communities" to remind us that authors have moral allegiances to their reading communities. Each in a different way, the essays are all grounded by an emphasis on "fiction" as invention--a creative act of composition--that intends to engage audiences. These essays argue that the authors are conscious of the circulation of these fictions (we might say, instead, how they will engage their audiences) and therefore may be considered meta-fictional. As imagined here, these "fictions of circulation" show us that a text doesn't have to be circulated to be conscious of the world in which it was written and the world in which it will be received.

While each scholar employs a very different reading lens, they each combine--to varying degrees--close reading with historical criticism in response to the issue's call to push back at the notion of distant (or, in Damrosch's terms, "detached") reading. In seeking book reviews to accompany these essays, I encouraged reviewers to select books that also challenge such readings. Liam Lanigan's review of *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* emphasizes how the Warwick Collective's re-imagining of close reading can "calibrate our understanding of how texts circulate." Sean Seeger reviews another recent book, Adam Kirsch's *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century*, which employs close reading to argue that the "global novel" is a "sophisticated form of meta-fiction, engaged in reflecting on the conditions of its own possibility." Both reviews bring us back again to our point of departure, "fictions of circulation."

How does this kind of self-conscious text, though, help us to wrestle with the question "what is world literature?" This question has been intertwined with informal and academic definitions of "globalization," whether they be technological, economic, sociopolitical, etc., for the last two decades. Some scholars have aimed to redefine world literature as global literature (Baucom), while a number of the most recent considerations of world literature--like Kirsch's book and Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*--have even endeavored to define more specifically the genre of global novel. My instinct is to resist this focus on "global" in exploring the question at hand, however. For one, the stress on reception has resulted in an emphasis on literature that has been globalized by readers rather than composed with any sort of global readership in mind. More importantly, however, is the simple fact that the "world" in world literature does not have to mean the "global" in globalization. The globe as conceived by 21 (st) -century media rhetoric is arguably just as invented as any of our fictions--as Gayatri Spivak puts it, "The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it" (72). As Pheng Cheah points out, literary theories predicated on globalization "conflat[e] the world with the globe and reduc[e] the world to a spatial object produced by the material processes of global circulation" (309). He offers an important critique of the emphasis on the transmission of texts, noting that "recent attempts to revise world literature have obscured its normative dimension because they have only understood the world in terms of spatial circulation, the paradigmatic case of which is global capitalist market exchange" (303). These models of circulation also, as Joseph Slaughter points out, fail to acknowledge that they rely on dominant property models of literary production that ignore the "property lopsidedness" (40) in the very systems they describe. Considering circulation without what he identifies as "national and international contexts of creative activity that constitute and constrain the conditions for literature" (44) is not only problematic for any useful definition of world literature, but also works to reify the core-periphery hierarchy.

To use the term "circulation" in our point of departure may, therefore, appear problematic. We might ask if by using the term circulation we irrevocably conjure the specter of capitalism. Even one of the earliest notions of world literature, Goethe's vision of *Weltliteratur*, was steeped in the discourse of economics and enterprise. However, while one might argue that capitalism is the necessary condition for globalization as we now know it, goods and people and literature circulated long before the advent of capitalism. As DiQuattro's article suggests, authors themselves circulate, acting as vectors of transmission for their work. A "fiction of circulation" may be born as such because its author assumes a position of exile, emigration, or diaspora. The essays in this issue demonstrate that yes, the authors are concerned with circulation, but not in the sense of the exchange of goods. They are instead occupied with notions of engagement, with the communication of worldviews and values.

Here we might return to the query of how this issue helps us to answer the question "what is world literature?" As he critiques the answers provided by the likes of Damrosch, Casanova, Moretti, etc., Cheah also identifies two major failings in the question itself. First, he argues that theorists neglect to answer the question "What is a world?" or to identify "whether the world is a normative or merely descriptive category." Second, he argues they fail to explicate "literature's causality in relation to the world" (317). Rajagopalan Radhkrishnan also condemns the question, asking, "How many worlds are there in the one world?" and invoking, as he says, "imperialism colonialism, racism, Eurocentrism and other 'worldviews' whose longue duree is still the tacit authority in whose name the world speaks for itself" (1397). He reminds us that "it matters crucially who in the world is raising the issue of world literature and from what location" (1398). This journal issue presents readings that may help to identify what we could mean by "world" when we discuss world literature. The fictions examined in this issue exhibit an ethical draw that is larger than their local community. That ethical draw is present in the writing, but it is also amplified and augmented by each scholar's reading. Their interpretations suggest that world literature is, then, a mode both of writing and of reading. To be more precise, we might say it is an ethical orientation towards the Other which may be enacted in both reading and writing. We might borrow Vilashini Cooppan's sense of globalized reading (if not the problematic term): "it displaces the hegemonic sense of 'world' as fictive universality in favor of a vision of many worlds, individually distinct and variously connected" (6). These "worlds" might better be considered "communities," but we can certainly see this notion in the articles contained here. Ba, Artaud, Coetzee, Phillips--none writes for a universal "world" (or, to be sure, a "literary landscape" or "planetary system") but for overlapping local, national, and international communities.

This is what Franco Moretti forgets in his definition of "world texts," those that figure a "geographical frame of reference [that] is no longer the nation-state, but a broader entity--a continent, or the world-system as a whole" (*Modern Epic* 50). The work of the authors explored in this issue may certainly be considered "world texts" by this definition, but they are also less--and more--at the same time. Their frame of reference is situated on both a local and "worldly" level. If we aimed to argue that world literature is an ethical orientation, we would need to acknowledge the very real material conditions of authors and readers in the overlapping and unequal systems that dictate their creative production. To do so cannot but require close reading. These essays show us that in the question of world literature, "world" is more than a geographic location. It is an ethical system in which humans engage with others, one constantly defining and redefining both self and other. They also show us that literature is a mode of writing born of a body in this system, in this world. We might ask if "world literature" is that writing which has a constitutive effect on our ways of knowing and being.

In closing, I would be remiss not to thank all the participants of my 2015 ACLA panel: Benjamin Brand, Marianne DiQuattro, Elizabeth Geballe, Nicholas Grant-Collins, and Meri Wimberly. I must also thank my colleagues at the 2014 Institute for World Literature where this idea first began brewing--including, of course, Sean Seeger. My sincere gratitude also goes out to my Texas Woman's University colleagues, in particular librarian Susan Whitmer and graduate assistant Alec Head, without whom this introduction would not exist. Finally, I send up my greatest thanks to the late Joseph Buttigieg, who started me on this long path from Auerbach's "Philology and *Weltliteratur*." This special issue is dedicated to you, Joe.

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