Introduction

Marketing World Literature

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From Goethe’s day to the present, the spread of world literature has been closely tied to the growth in world markets. In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels famously made the connection explicit in the Communist Manifesto:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionaries, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. [...] In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature.

Manifesto, chapter 1

To the distress of chagrined reactionaries, this new economic “intercourse in all directions” paved the way for the rise of world literature – but only literature of a certain sort. Wherever in the world it was produced, Marx and Engels considered, world literature would reflect the values of the European bourgeoisie, which “compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image” (Manifesto, chapter 1).

More recently, a range of critiques have seen not only world literature but also world-literary studies as complicit with the global metastasis of neoliberal
capitalism, suppressing the variety of local cultures and markets and occluding any political challenges to American or Anglophone hegemony. Thus in “The Trouble with World Literature” (2011), Graham Huggan argues “that World Literature institutionally supports what it claims ideologically to oppose or, to put it still more bluntly, that it represents the cultural realpolitik of globalization” (491). Building on these perspectives and also complicating them, the essays that follow study the globalizing strategies of authors, prize committees, and literary festivals to probe the productive possibilities, and the dangers, raised by the growth of global literary markets.

Each year, an issue of the Journal of World Literature stems from a theme highlighted in a recent session of the Institute for World Literature. The lead essay in this issue, Gisèle Sapiro’s “Literature Festivals: A New Authority in the Transnational Literary Field,” is a revised and expanded version of a plenary talk she gave at iwl’s session at Harvard in July 2019. Drawing on research into more than three dozen literary festivals, Sapiro shows that they both reflect and help to shape the international literary field as a form of cultural capital. She argues that the rise of festivals since the 1980s coincides with contemporary globalization, and that festivals often reinforce global inequalities even as they seek to democratize literary markets and to use the prestige of well-known authors to bring attention to new authors and to less-read literatures. She places special emphasis on the strategies with which festival organizers counter the ingrained power imbalances of the global market and seek to create a broader and more diverse translational public sphere.

The problematics of international festivals were already evident in Marx and Engels’ day. Following Sapiro’s essay, Levente T. Szabó’s “International Exhibitions, Literary Capitalism, and the Emergence of Comparative Literature” argues that these fairs provided an important frame for the self-fashioning of national literatures and competition among them, but while these fairs typically promoted free trade in cultural as well as other goods, they also served the interests of Western nations over nonwestern ones, and of dominant European countries over their smaller neighbors. He discusses a sharply critical essay from 1878 on Viennese and Parisian expositions universelles by Hugo Meltzl, the Transylvanian co-founder of the pioneering journal of comparative and world literature, the Ata Comparationis Litteratum Universarum. In his essay, Meltzl dissects the tendency of the international exhibitions to transform literature into mass-market commodities, and he gives an early critique of the emerging regime of global copyright as a particularly insidious form of great-power protectionism.

We return to the twenty-first century with Mushtaq Bilal’s “Pakistani Literature Festivals and a Scopaesthesiac Consciousness.” Adapting a term from
psychology, “scopaesthesia” – the feeling of being watched by someone one can’t see – Bilal offers an in-depth analysis of two annual literary festivals in Karachi and Lahore. These are festivals of national rather than world literature, and yet they exist within a world context, as much imagined as real. With detailed analysis of the festivals’ organization, funding, presenters, and the politics of language choices, Bilal shows that underlying the festivals’ announced goal of promoting Pakistani writing for a general public, the festivals’ organizers are first and foremost concerned to present a “soft image” of Pakistan to an imagined Anglophone outsider.

Where the Pakistani festivals seek to counter foreign images of Pakistan as a repressive sponsor of terrorism, Kaitlin Staudt’s essay “World Literature Bigger Than Five” discusses a literary prize in Turkey that has been enlisted in the fight against terrorism. Her title alludes to a 2016 speech to the United Nations General Assembly by Turkish president Recep Tayip Erdoğan, who observed that the world is much larger than the five permanent members of the Security Council; his statement became a slogan for a broad program of promoting Turkey on the world stage, and simultaneously repressing “terrorist” Kurdish culture in the process.

Ironically, one consequence of the repressive policies towards Kurds both in Turkey and elsewhere has been growing international attention to the literature of imprisoned Kurdish writers. In her essay “From Remote Prisons to Global Readership,” Pelin Kivrak compares two literary works of very different provenance: a short story collection written in prison by Selahattin Demirtaş, the progressive Kurdish leader of Turkey’s second-largest opposition party, and a memoir by the Iranian exile Behrouz Boochani, written as a stateless person in “a multinational non-space,” Australia’s detention center for illegal immigrants on Christmas Island. As she shows, the two authors counter their different forms of oppression by producing works that could be received and marketed as transnational pieces of world literature.

In “Escaping Prestige,” Michael Ka-chi Cheuk discusses a very different kind of flight by an exiled writer: the struggle of Gao Xingjian to reinvent himself in the wake of his receipt of the Nobel Prize in 2000. Rejecting the monumentalization of the Nobel, and resisting being marketed as a poster boy for opposition to Chinese authoritarianism, Gao created a multimedia project in 2003 with the ironic title “L’année Gao,” in which he portrayed death in five different media (paintings, poetry, theatre, opera, and cinema). In this way, Cheuk argues, Gao could restore both his autonomy and his fragility as an artist and a human being.

Given the intimate connection of literary prizes to commercial markets, it is illuminating to consider a wider range of works than belles-lettres. In “A
New World Literature Canon: The Business Book," Ben Holgate argues that non-fiction is as important in world literature as fiction, and he offers the intriguing case of an annual award given by London’s Financial Times to “the Business Book of the Year.” Holgate argues that many of the award’s longlisted books have significant literary value and use classic techniques borrowed from fiction to tell their stories; two of the winners have actually been novels about business. Further, these business books can be seen as world literature in the material sense that they transcend language and local conditions to circulate globally. At the same time, the winning books – most of them written by Americans – show the growth of an American world literature within business writing, a pattern at variance with the award’s global goals. The business book market, like the wider economic landscape, isn’t nearly as flat as some of the prizewinners may suppose.

Our special issue concludes with a study of readers’ online responses to literary prizes awarded by the Booker and Pulitzer committees. In “Worldlit as MMORPG? Wholesaling world literature in the Age of Amazon,” Amélie Hurkens shows that readers’ postings on the website Goodreads reflect the awards’ prestige and also increasingly upstage the awards themselves: legions of readers become massively expanded and democratized analogs of the Booker or Pulitzer prize committees, and their collective ratings fuel the placement and sales of the readers’ favorites among the prize winners on Goodreads’ parent site – Amazon.com.

Written by scholars coming from eight countries (Australia, China, France, Pakistan, Romania, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States), these eight essays offer a range of perspectives on literary markets. The contributors critique cultural realpolitik, whether open or masked under idealistic rhetoric, but they also showcase strategies with which writers and other agents in the literary marketplace have built new and progressive forms of cultural capital, at once within and against the means of production and communication in the contemporary economic sphere.

Works Cited
