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Big Nations' Literature and Small Nations' Sociology

This paper explores literary authors as cultural brokers in the context of world literature. Vignettes from literary events illustrate that what is today understood as world literature is fiction from Third World countries translated into English, written largely by migrant writers for the consumption of metropolitan readers who sample them as ethnographies of unknown places. Authors feature on the stage of world literature as representatives of their "culture as a whole". The only way for them to be consecrated through translation into English is to write a sociology of their "culture", sustaining that culture's fixed, backward, and romanticised images through thick descriptions of its *ethnos*.

[*world literature, translation, cultural broker, nation, exotic, foreign, literary value, chronopolitics, politics of representation, authentic, Third World, ethnography, commodification*]

Literature as a Window into the World

Since 2005, American¹ PEN's literary festival *World Voices* has taken place every year in April in New York. It is marketed as the largest festival of international literature: a celebration of literary diversity. Writers, publishers, and editors from all over the world gather for a week full of exciting readings and literary discussions. The festival's message could be read as follows: the whole world is *here-and-now*; the centre of *here-and-now* is New York. Over the last two decades, topics of displacement and migration have densely populated the world of letters. In 2007 this was reflected in the festival's annual theme: Home and Away. Writing from a migrant or exiled position has become fashionable. As much as academic discussions count on these positions to deconstruct the national(ist) nature of literary canons, the literary marketplace mobilises them in the "old" ways. In other words, no matter how displaced writers are from home, their literature is still expected to provide lo-

¹ American PEN is the name commonly given to PEN American Center, based in New York City. Another PEN centre in the USA, called PEN Center USA, works with writers from the West Coast.

cal images while they continue being classified according to that "lost" home.

Introducing the "world republic of letters"

This paper explores the geographical, temporal, and aesthetic embeddedness of world literature, particularly as contextualised at live international literary events. My ethnography centres on one large festival and several smaller events: it does not purport to cover perspectives from individual readers or university departments. I engage with the concept of world literature as: a) a specific set of knowledges produced about the world and cultural difference; b) a socio-political and cultural perspective through which certain texts are sought after, read, and canonised; and c) a commodity with a global market-value. Understandings of world literature have changed throughout history, particularly in relation to wider socio-political events and movements. This trajectory starts with Goethe, often perceived as a founding father of the *Weltliteratur* project, runs through Cold War images of the world, and leads into other more recent ideas of nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006) or a process of "narration" (Bhabha 1990). Common to all these is the connection between literature and nation. Whether world literature is about a better understanding *between* nations, a better understanding *about* unknown nations, or challenging the coherence of the nation itself, a writer, it seems, can only become internationally known via their national origin.

Ethnographic accounts from the *World Voices* festival illustrate how national representations are produced and appropriated within the international book market. My main argument revolves around the notion of world literature as a window into new uncharted lands, offering a form of intellectual tourism, entertainment, and a desired lifestyle. What international literary professionals' circles call world literature is, therefore, the literature of small² nations available in English translation. It is most often written by exiled, migrant, or otherwise displaced writers – cultural brokers – who "speak the dominant language" and offer a view into their "culture". Written, marketed, and read as such, works of world literature today are mostly read as *ethnographies* of places to which metropolitan readers seek access. They are perceived as authentic accounts of foreignness. In this communicative process, their readers, while being educated about various "cultural" differences, also establish themselves as politi-

² "Small" in this context refers to countries of small or limited literary capital.

cally liberal. Works of world literature are thus appreciated in aesthetic terms only insofar as they conform to the dominant metropolitan poetics. In a political sense, they conceal traces of the violence and power struggle that take place within the literary geopolitics of the world.

Ideas and practices of foreignness are central to how the project of world literature functions. Amid growing globalisation and localisation, it provides easier access to diverse national literatures, yet in terms of literary poetics it diminishes diversity and creates a uniform expression dotted with bits of *ethnic* information. The foreignness of translated fiction is also understood differently from the non-conformity of domestic narratives. My ethnography shows that it is important not only to establish the aesthetic value of foreignness but also its socio-political function in the process of communication between the reader/consumer and the writer/cultural broker.

My window into world literature

In April 2007, I was given the opportunity to travel to New York and “see for myself” what was marketed as the world’s largest literary event. As a representative from English PEN³, I travelled there to present the Writers in Translation programme to our US colleagues and to learn about their support of translated literature. I was given two goals: one was to find out how the two PEN centres could pool funds and more efficiently support literary translation; the other was to observe and report back on “why *World Voices* was successful”. This would help English and International PEN in setting up a sister festival in London the following year.

At the American PEN office in Manhattan, I quickly made friends with my US colleagues. We drank coffee and had lunch together throughout my stay. This informal setting helped me to learn how the likes of Sam Shepard and Patti Smith had been lined up for this year’s readings. The secret answer to my question was simply “one important name”, as my colleague drawled: Salman Rushdie. He had moved from the UK to become the President of American PEN and the patron of *World Voices*. Jo told me that “when he picks up the phone and invites someone to take part in the Festival, he never gets a *no* for an answer”. Many people hold him to be a literary legend, both for his work and his personal triumph against fundamentalism: “everyone wants to be associated with a project he’s endorsing”, Jo told me. She also said that “most of his work on the

³ I worked at the English PEN while carrying out my fieldwork.

Festival is just lending out his name to attract big-name writers'. Rushdie also gave opening and closing speeches: he delivered them monumentally and charismatically.

At *World Voices*, my five-year experience of the international literary scene culminated in the following realisation: there existed a front and back stage, and not just literally, although that too was part of the metaphor. A particular rhetoric about world literature was being produced and mobilised, which often did not match what *really* went on. Three major messages were sent to the audience: 1) we are all a big, diverse, and happy Family of Man, embracing everyone around the world; 2) literature, as a pure and purely aesthetic endeavour, independent of utilitarianism and commerce, speaks the universal human language accessible to everyone; 3) as "literature knows no frontiers" (PEN slogan) and campaigns against nationalisms, migrant and exiled writers are those who have the power to subvert such destructive forces: i.e. alterity is a site of political power.

As I attended readings and round table discussions, where I communicated with and "consumed" literary diversity, the definition of *world* in the world literature presented at *World Voices* became apparent. It was similar to what today is understood as world music: "commercially available music of non-Western origin and circulation, as well as all musics of dominated ethnic minorities within the Western world" (Feld 1995:104). World literature, therefore, even though it is promoted as an equal brotherhood of literary voices, comprises that opus which has non-Western origin and is available in English. Thus, the choice and range of authors taking part in *World Voices* reflected a specific literary geopolitics (see below). Additionally, *voices* were not random "authentic" sounds of literature, but were assigned as serious functions to certain writers: those from small nations were there to represent their "culture", though most of them were actually displaced from the "homes" they stood for. Providing a window into their "culture" through their literature seemed to have become their ticket into world literature. In this sense, universality of themes or aesthetic disinterest were reserved for Western writers, as illustrated in the structure of various festival events.

Some events focused on a single country or region: one hugely successful event was called "The Mediterranean Noir", celebrating the detective novel from countries that share a Mediterranean coast (Spain, Italy, Morocco), but also depicting the region as distinct, exotic, and mainly homogenous. Others highlighted a certain theme. One of the most frequented events, attended by almost a thousand people, focused on the political power of literature: it featured a writer from Africa, an Australian Aboriginal, and a Haitian writer. The message was obvious: only non-Western

countries *need* literature to be political, and they need it to be *political* in the same way. Events featuring travel writing also revealed literary geopolitics. For example, a round table discussion about “The Other Europe” was conducted by writers who were either Westerners travelling “on the edges of Europe” or were native East Europeans who lived in exile.

The concrete numbers of writers and countries covered by *World Voices* support this argument. Charts of statistics collected from festival promotional material covering the period 2005–09 illustrate two important facts: first, small nations dominate world literature, contributing to the new meaning of the concept; and second, migrants, exiles, and émigrés from small nations make up the majority of *voices* perceived to be representative of their “culture”.

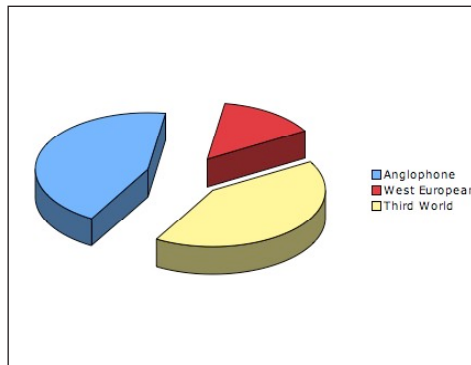


Fig. 1. The overall participation of countries at World Voices (2005–09).

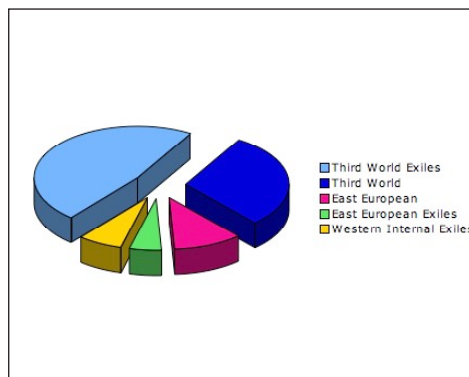


Fig. 2. The breakdown of the Third World category within which exiled writers (from Third World settled in the West) constitute a majority. (NB: Western Internal exiles represent writers from dominated regions within a state, e.g. Catalonia within Spain)

This information illustrates that the concept of world literature has changed significantly since Goetheian *Weltliteratur*. In addition to its historical contextualisation, which I shortly provide, world literature needs to be understood as a project cross-cut with divergent political and ideological intentions. I specifically comment on its universalist "ideology" marketed and performed at festivals such as *World Voices* and socio-political conditions which allow it to assume the literary front stage.

Lisa Appignanesi, a British writer of diverse cultural and linguistic background and a former President of English PEN, has argued that "no writer can represent a nation or a state" but they should "serve as ambassadors for their culture as a whole". Representing their "cultures as a whole" is precisely the kind of *voice* American PEN celebrates as part of world literature. Attributing writers such a function implicitly sets a quota for festival organisers: the lesser-known or more politically pertinent a place, the more writers from there are invited to represent their "culture as a whole". Globalisation and commodification of literature has meant that world literature covers more stories from diverse localities; at the same time, their differences are flattened out, so what is preserved is only the form of a consumable exotic. In such a context, the ambassadorial role includes the following functions: a) the writer offers "a native's point of view"; b) they do that from a detached position of exile, temporary residence abroad, or Western education; c) they fashion the information in an accessible way for the metropolitan reader (e.g. Rushdie (1991) writes that they translate themselves before the linguistic translation takes place); and d) they embrace and re-enact the foreignness of their "culture as a whole". When I asked Lisa what makes a national writer international, she answered: "the fact that their work is important enough to cross boundaries". Interestingly though, becoming part of world literature also means remaining in their own "culture as a whole" in order to be considered a *voice*.

Nation and Literature Hand in Hand

Weltliteratur: origins of world literature

From its earliest critical conception, world literature has been understood as having a national, even a nationalistic, component (McInturff 2003). Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, one of the first visions of world literature as a category, acknowledges this power of nationalism. Inspired by Herder's ideas about tension between a cosmopolitan humanity and national dis-

tinctiveness (Lawall 1994:17), *Weltliteratur* emphasised the importance of national character as a contribution to civilisation in general. Such readings of translated fiction continue to be practiced at international literary festivals, with national writers' educational and ambassadorial roles being a constant part of *Weltliteratur*.

In England, Herder's idea of particular national contributions towards civilisation was appropriated by Mathew Arnold. However, while Herder never conceived of world nations in a hierarchical order of "objectively"-established worth, Arnold believed that a tribunal of civilised nations should judge where on the continuum of civilisation each nation had its place. These ideas of progress and the ability of civilised nations' literatures to prompt others towards modernisation reflect the colonial and imperial socio-political context of the 19th century. The literary "conquest" of the world can thus easily be compared to the anthropological project of creating the Other as its object of study (Fabian 1983): a process through which the geographical space of the world was conceived as the chronology of human evolution. As the geographical difference across space was equated with a historical difference across time (McClintock 1994:40), the difference also became perceived as distance: creating of the Other.

The evolutionary "family" concept provided an "alibi of nature" for imperial interventions by which paternal fathers benignly ruled over immature children (McClintock 1994:45). By the same logic, equality was not perceived as a natural reflection of human equivalence but the result of Western benevolence. International literary events and the inclusion of diverse voices into world literature thus imply that they have come about due to Westerners' broadmindedness and enlightened appreciation (ibid.:26). World literature, which is represented as a happy Family of Man, therefore hides the geopolitical and chronopolitical premises of inequality on which it rests.

Reading *Weltliteratur*

In *What is World Literature?*, David Damrosch (2003a) argues that literature in general and world literature in particular are perceived in three ways: as a) an established body of classics; b) an evolving canon of masterpieces; and c) multiple windows into the world. The "classic", he explains, is a work of transcendent, even foundational, value, often identified particularly with Greek and Roman literatures and closely associated with imperial values (Kermode 1983). The "masterpiece", however, can be a recent, even a contemporary, work, without having to exhibit foundational cul-

tural force. Finally, as Goethe was developing his idea of *Weltliteratur*, he mentioned Chinese novels and Serbian poetry as his night-time reading. These kinds of books cover the third definition of world literature – that of “windows into the world”.

Pascale Casanova (2004) describes today's geopolitical space of world literature as “a world republic of letters” with its own economy that produces hierarchies and various forms of violence. Relations between literatures are governed by the amount of literary and symbolic capital defining both the centre and periphery; the latter's distance is understood in aesthetic terms. Although it is more practical to speak of small and big nations, world literary space is actually best imagined as a continuum, with dominant and dominated literatures at each end. This field's unifying force is the existence of a common standard for measuring time, an absolute point of reference unconditionally recognised by all contestants: Casanova metaphorically calls it the Greenwich meridian of literature. It is at once a point in space and a basis for measuring time, i.e. a way to estimate relative aesthetic distance from the centre of the world of letters. Casanova writes: “it is necessary to be old in order to have any chance of being modern or of decreeing what is modern” (Casanova 2004:89). Classics thus always come from literatures that are old and have chronologically achieved “modernisation”, at which point they are decontextualised from time and space and come to stand for all humanity. Because English is the world's most dominant language, there are no classics which are unavailable in English. In other words, literary translation into English is the foremost example of consecration. When a source literature is small, Casanova adds, translation is more than just the exchange of texts: it means obtaining a certificate of literary standing, in her words a *littérisation* (ibid.:135).

World Voices and other international literary events revealed which countries could be considered literarily big or small. Among Anglophone literatures, the UK and US canons are certainly the strongest, followed by Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. It is, however, common for the books by ethnic, minority, working class, feminist, etc., writers also to be read as small nations' literatures – a good example is Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, a novel that was celebrated as a window into an obscure sub-culture. Former imperial powers, such as France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, even Russia, fall on the dominant end of the continuum. Scandinavian countries, though economically powerful, are mostly read as literary small nations. The rest of the world occupies the literarily-dominated end of the spectrum.

What is the difference between big and small nations and why is this important for world literature? Igor Marojević, a Serbian writer and a

long-term research participant of mine, said: "small nations practically have no right to literature, only to sociology, judging from what most readers in dominant languages expect to get from their books". The following ethnographic data reveal that big nations' literature, almost as a rule, deals with universal themes, such as love, redemption, or scientific progress. The settings of these novels are rarely foregrounded. Small nations' literature, however, is largely perceived as an ethnographic, educational, and exoticised text offering a rich context of cultural specificities and peculiarities: the more exotic, bizarre, estranging – the better. Only a certain type of exotic which can be easily assimilated to the dominant cultural and poetic codes is sought after. Such reading practices situate small nations' literatures in a specific geographical and temporal context – they are denied universality. However, because they are also made into the object of the literary "conquest" – the literary Other – their cultural specificities are flattened out. What remains is a decontextualised and commodified text in English, offering a window into the world. "Writing small nations' sociology," Igor told me, "is the only way a foreign writer from a small country stands a chance of being translated into English."

Several challenges arise within world literature as a window into the world: increased diversification and reading world literature as "national allegory". In recent years the opening of so many windows into such varied times and places has driven the field of world literature to expand enormously. The expansion itself raises questions: are "these newly visible texts (...) testimonies to a new wealth of cultural diversity, or are they being sucked up in the Disneyfication of the globe" (Damrosch 2003: 10)? Other scholars (Miyoshi 1991; Venuti 1998) have also pointed out that literary translations in the US have more to do with American interests and needs than with America's genuine openness to other cultures: foreign works will rarely be translated unless they reflect American concerns and fit comfortably with American images of the foreign culture in question (Damrosch 2003:10). The *world* in such readings of foreign literature has become a global commodity, whose multiplicity of voices can be celebrated and "conquered" only through literary conformity. In the UK, for example, Tariq Ali calls the trivialisation and levelling-out of literary thought and style "market realism" (Ali 1993), a direct reference to the Socialist Realism imposed during communism as a set of socio-literary norms. Ali writes that market realism has become a "self-imposed strait-jacket" (ibid.:10), having reduced literature to just another branch of the entertainment industry.

The second challenge of world literature as a window into the world comes fore through the academic argument between Frederic Jameson and some postcolonial scholars, namely Aijaz Ahmad. In 1986, Jameson

(1986) wrote that Third-World literature should be read as a national allegory. Even when, he argues, it is written in predominantly Western machineries of representation, such as the novel, "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (ibid.:69). Ahmad's critique, considered paradigmatic, calls this postulation colonialist in character and tendency. First, he argues that there is no such thing as an internally-coherent object of theoretical knowledge that can be called "third world literature" (Ahmad 1987:96-7). Secondly, Ahmad calls Jameson's notion of "third world" literature his "rhetoric of otherness" because Jameson portrays it as backward and still embroiled in those tasks that have already been completed in the West, such as nation-building. Clearly, Ahmad points his finger at the specific chronopolitics which denies "third world" literature thematic and stylistic universality or contemporaneity with the West. More recently, however, Neil Lazarus (2004) has defended Jameson: it is not that Jameson thinks "third world" literature is not as good as "first world" literature; "it is rather that the (Western) canon serves in the 'first-world' thought as a false universal, preventing any concrete engagement with 'third-world' (or culturally different) texts" (ibid.:55). My contention is that Jameson did not advocate an *a priori* allegorical reading of every Third World text; it would be correct, however, to assume that the allegorising process as a structural tendency has largely been defining how the West reads the Rest of the World.

The challenges of world literature discussed so far raise the question of the writer's "culture": how it is represented (as a stable, fixed, and decontextualised set of images), the salience of writers' "cultural" belonging (ethnicity), and their function of representing it (cultural brokers). Georges Devereux (1978) pointed out a few decades ago the dangers of performing one sole type of social belonging 24 hours a day to the exclusion of the multiplicity of a person's wider set of social practices. The interesting phenomenon lies in how exile, migration, and ideas of cosmopolitanism are appropriated in the context of world literature. Since exile and writing away from home was the topic of 2007 *World Voices* festival yet a vast majority of displaced writers were still expected to represent their home "cultures", *home* remained present in all the narratives of cosmopolitanism, even if only as a reference point or vivid image to which the writers frequently returned. "No one actually is or ever can be a cosmopolitan in the sense of belonging nowhere", writes Bruce Robbins (1992:260). "The interest of the term *cosmopolitanism* is located, then, not in its full theoretical extension, where it becomes a paranoid fantasy of ubiquity and omniscience, but rather (paradoxically) in its local applications". Many examples of how Dubravka Ugrešić exists between her home and foreign

audience illustrate that she is not devoid of local connections but rather is multiply linked to the events and audiences at home and abroad. Reading world literature therefore re-enacts the tangible experience of *home* as a static space that can be easily accessed.

Anthropology has widely used the word "culture", mostly thinking of it in terms of fluidities and complexities. "Culture" becomes a problem when it turns into a shorthand, either for the discipline or a wider political context, only to avoid enquiry into the causes of social processes. My ethnography suggests that the project of world literature has used "culture" precisely in this static, reified way, which Chris Hann (2003) argues is not much different to the invocation of superstition.

The implicit imperial logic in the project of world literature, the representation of "cultures" as stable and fixed entities in a subordinate position to the metropolitan centre, has been heavily criticised by Homi Bhabha. However, Bhabha has also argued for reviving the concept of world literature specifically to challenge this issue. In his article "The World and the Home" (Bhabha 1992) he advocates the productive possibilities inherent in Goethe's *Weltliteratur*: instead of celebrating "national" traditions, he suggests focusing on transnational histories of migrants, the colonised, or the political refugees as the terrains of world literature (Bhabha 1992:146). His focus on the so called "freak displacements" that would trouble representations of national coherence is a fundamentally important revision, additionally re-evaluating and challenging core notions of world literature that are both nationalistic and imperialistic. In other words, nation has always been the basic category by which writers were accepted into the international literary canon. Today, exiled writers whose lives are endangered in their very home countries get categorised according to no literary criterion, just according to the nation they have fled. Bhabha's argument leaves aside challenging the imperialism inherent in the literary mapping of the world, appealing instead for the nation itself to be demonstrated as lacking coherence. Thus his (anti)canon would include specifically those works of literature concerned with a form of cultural dissensus and alterity, where non-consensual terms of affiliation and articulation may be established on the grounds of historical trauma (Bhabha 1992:145-6). Bhabha's picture of world literature is a defence of the migrant or, as he has written elsewhere, "culture's in between", against the nation's self-declared centres (McInturff 2003:234).

As migration becomes a more common human experience in the age of globalisation and definitions of "home" and "away" are reconceptualised, Bhabha's suggestion to introduce a migrant writer as the main sovereign of world literature makes perfect sense. However, ethnography from

World Voices and beyond demonstrates that the exilic position and writing produced outside the home country are already anything but neglected in world literature. Cases of ex-Yugoslav authors, such as Dubravka Ugrešić, Slavenka Drakulić, Vladimir Aresnijić, Miljenko Jergović, etc. show that precisely the “in between” position has given those writers a new lease of prominence, from publishing deals to literary festivals and readings. However, even as exiled writers, they are still recognised and categorised through the nation they have left behind. And if that nation with time becomes less politically troubled – for example, Croatia has turned from a wartime frog into a touristic prince – then they are labelled and read through their position as “freakishly displaced”. Small nations’ literatures are, as a rule, read through the rich repertoire of their particularities, while big nations’ literatures are “allowed” the humanistic universalism Goethe advocated so many years ago. Although Bhabha’s project of decentralising and deconceptualising the coherence of the nation is welcome, it seems not to help overcome the constricting labelling of writers who are not creating in metropolitan centres.

Sampling *World Literature*

Which foreign is the right type of foreign?

Heather is a literary translator who contributed regularly to this research. She translates from four languages and is widely known and respected in UK literary circles. She also has a great sense of humour, particularly when it comes to the “problems of literary translations in this country”. When she was only starting out, she told me, she was instructed to use as few foreign words as possible in translation. The difference today is that linguistically the presence of foreignness is smoothed over through editing while the cultural peculiarities are what attracts attention. Heather shows no satisfaction with such a turn of events and comments on the “hypocrisy of UK publishing”:

When you read *Lord of the Rings*, you find a mass of stupid neologisms and names that you can’t even pronounce. Isn’t that foreign too? Why do people buy it like crazy? Only because the guy who wrote it was English...

I soon discovered that Heather was right: isolated foreign words for objects and practices revealing a new “culture” have stopped being a problem and become an attraction. Anything that can be explained away and “tamed” by using language and literary style which in themselves do not

repel the reader becomes a desirable kind of foreignness. I witnessed this at a session of the Bloomberg⁴ reading group which had chosen a work by the Icelandic writer Sjón, *The Blue Fox*. The meetings took place shortly after a Sjón event at the *Free the Word* festival in London – the sister event to New York's *World Voices*. I asked Sjón's translator how she had managed to get the work commissioned. The book had been published in 17 other languages before being picked up in the UK, she told me. The final push came from a German publisher who vouched for the novel's quality with its UK publisher, but the translation had also largely been funded by the Icelandic institute for the promotion of national culture.

Most participants of the reading group shared concerns about the narrative being disjointed and difficult to follow. On the other hand, they found the book's topic very stimulating: it tackles difficult social issues, such as abortion policy and the social exclusion of Down's-syndrome children. Ideas of strong national identity are played out through images from old Nordic mythology, weaving in stories about Viking warriors, deities, and supernatural creatures, all dotted around the majestic snowy landscape. Most participants seemed to have enjoyed the "fantastic" aspects of the book: even the Blue Fox is an allegorical creature. No matter what they called this non-realistic layer, the readers invested effort to sift through the "disjointed" narrative in order to enjoy the deliciously foreign parts. The translator reminded us that *The Blue Fox* is Sjón's only book with magical and folk elements. Otherwise he writes "realist, everyday" prose with "normal" characters who have "problems just like anyone else in the world". *The Blue Fox*, interestingly, is Sjón's only book available in English, though he is well known for his collaboration with Bjork.

I spoke to Sjón after his event at *Free the Word* festival. "*The Blue Fox*," he told me, "made it into translation precisely because it was exotic enough for the UK readership." He also emphasised:

Readers don't want to hear how *similar* two cultures are, but how *different* they are – they want to learn about another country by focusing on the differences only if those differences are told in the language that is communicable enough for them.

The content of the exotic may change, but its aesthetic and socio-political reception remains the same. In that sense, what a Nordic mythology of fox-hunters and ancient Viking warriors provides for Sjón's novel is the same that images of gory Balkan war and primitivism provide for ex-Yugoslav writers. This becomes the right type of foreignness, even if UK readers have to struggle a little through the dense narrative style. Espe-

⁴ Bloomberg funded the first sister festival of international literature in London.

cially if the foreignness can be presented in the form of glossaries, annotations, images, or charts, the window to the world opens up even more.

Ugrešić's novel *The Ministry of Pain* (2005) ends with a peculiar type of annotation, offering a window into Balkan "culture as a whole" – a list of curses. Ninety curses that, written one under another, resemble a poetic chant conclude the novel as if with a message from an insightful researcher: this is what life is really like in the Balkans. Similarly, in Ugrešić's non-fiction book *The Culture of Lies* (1998) she openly and distinctly assumes the position of a cultural broker: she talks about both Serbs and Croats as equally "primitive", and by introducing a surprising number of very specific historical and cultural details, intentionally represents the Balkans as a homogeneous region. In several essays, she addresses the imaginary foreigner learning about "her culture as a whole" from reading her text and accepting the descriptions of everyday Balkan reality. As an author, she positions herself at a distance from the "primitive, violent, and tribal" Balkans, and this is reflected in a kind of mock glossary at the end of the book. There, Ugrešić explicates "a few brief notes for those readers who still find the author's position unclear" (Ugresic 1998:269). Glossaries normally introduce new linguistic expressions or cultural practices; yet, in this mock version, Ugrešić lists concepts such as: homeland, identity, patriotism, nationalism, fascism, communism, national history, language, a nation's writer, a writer's nation, exile, witches. A denotative level of information is offered, providing new knowledge about the "culture". However, the mock glossary allows Ugrešić to clearly state her position as a writer who wants to belong to world literature – a concept Goethe envisaged as relying on universalistic human values. In embedding herself in the position of a writer who writes against Balkanness in order to represent that very flavour on the international market of *voices*, she rarely questions the naturalness of either "primitive" or "universal" values or the division between them⁵.

Commenting on the changes in teaching world literature at universities, Damrosch (2003b) argues that increased contextualisation, i.e. embedding the work of world literature in time and space, is a "healthy" way of giving readers information about new "cultures": translators had

⁵ When the whole body of Ugrešić's literary work is considered, in particular the collection of essays *Thank You for not Reading*, her authorial position reflects more aspects than the one presently discussed. She has often assumed an auto-ironic stance towards the concept of national literature as well as towards commodified "false" universalism of world literature. So although aware of the dominant narrative codes through which foreign literature is read in the West, writers representing small literatures have none or very limited influence over how their work will be appropriated by the metropolitan media and literary culture.

used to omit or smooth over such information to preserve the fluency and apparent purity of the text, though in reality “they had to distort the text in order to avoid disrupting a supposedly direct encounter of reader and work” (Damrosch 2003b:521). This argument is only partly true. Both examples from Ugrešić’s books indeed demonstrate more footnotes, explanations, annotations, references to quite obscure information even for a native speaker. Linguistically speaking, however, the introduction of such new information has not radically altered or challenged the dominant poetic and cultural code. The way a story is narrated remains essentially very accessible to the English-speaking reader. What *has* happened is that the narrative is now additionally peppered with information that, though foreign, is *desirably* foreign. A foreignness that becomes more prominent through added contextual information does not endanger domestic literary or socio-political practices and can easily be integrated and domesticated by consuming it as a ready-made product. Such contextual framing might, on one hand, inspire university departments to a more intense study of “different cultures”. However, a broader understanding of how such processes are appropriated in public discourse, such as international literary festivals, raises concerns about this newly-found enthusiasm. Clearly, many readers do read world literature out of genuine interest, but the majority are likely to be unaware of the culturally imperialist power struggles underpinning the project of world literature. Without such awareness, those readers will never know which other books and reading experiences have never made it into translation.

The anthropological exotic

The reading and marketing practices of world literature so far described is what the Serbian writer Igor Marojević calls small nations’ sociology. When Marojević talks about literary geopolitics, he exudes irony and disappointment. Having lived in Spain for five years, he had tasted the Western style of publishing, of having to be “a Balkan poster boy”. Tired of “writing for other people and always having to know what they want”, he returned to Belgrade. In 2007, he published a somewhat radical novel *Šnit*: a semi-historical account of life during the Croatian fascist state (NDH), set in Zemun, today part of Serbia. The theme itself proved additionally charged by having Hugo Boss as a supporting character. Boss is credited as a designer of the original SS uniform: a thoroughly researched but not widely known fact in the West. Based on my UK literary experience, I suggested Marojević’s novel to several publishers, expecting it to

stir considerable interest. I was wrong. Six publishers with whom I had worked very closely in the past ignored my suggestion. The one publisher who replied told me that "Igor's literary style was too experimental and disjointed". He also said that "though Hugo Boss was an excellent sensationalist element in the book, for it to work, the book would really have to be about him, not about Croats, Serbs, and Germans". In this publisher's view, the amount of ex-Yugoslav WW2 history an average reader would be assumed to know in order to appreciate the "Hugo Boss sensation" or the politically subversive power of the novel was "way too much to expect". And, as a postscript, there was the inevitable question: "has the writer had any problems with authorities – censorship, imprisonment, public defamation?" I said no, (un)fortunately not. "How about any problems with the Orthodox Church – that would be interesting?" I said no again. The publisher then apologetically told me he would not be able to take the book on, though he himself, "knowing the region a little, could really appreciate its potential".

Through the role of a literary agent, I learned once again what was expected from a national literature as an export product. Though he lived in Spain, Marojević was not prepared to change his writing in order to act as a cultural broker or the native informant of his "culture as a whole". Not writing exclusively for the world audience directed his poetic style, type of foreignness, and amount of local embeddedness. His novel provided "too much of the wrong type of ethnography": a narrative that was too foreign for an imagined reader who has never been there. His intention was not to interpret, translate, or represent his locality; rather, the locality was the background code shared among people of the same collectivity⁶.

Graham Huggan (2001) has defined such specific writing/reading contract as the anthropological exotic. He specifically explores the marketing and consumption of African literature on the Anglophone market: he argues that the African literature invokes the aura of incommensurably "foreign" cultures while at the same time appearing to provide to the uninitiated reader a transparent window onto a richly detailed and culturally specific "other" (Huggan 2001:37). Similarly, I ask to what extent writing and reading of ex-Yugoslav literatures deploy these anthropological metaphors. Some authors, for example, write about and through these

⁶ It should be taken into account that Ugrešić's and Marojević's work emerged from different socio-political and material conditions: the former reflects the war-stricken ex-Yugoslavia and the latter the Serbia struggling with economic transition and conflicting moral values. The two examples, however, have been chosen to highlight the responses they produce with the Western audiences. Rather than comparing the work of these two writers, our focus should be on how the process of exchange is either supported or suppressed between foreign literature and Anglophone readers.

metaphors (Ugrešić) while others (Marojević), consciously or otherwise, refuse to. What are the implications of such anthropological writings and readings? And are such practices the only way for world literature to exist in the age of globalisation?

Some scholars (Asad 1986; Gikandi 1987), while agreeing that reading foreign literature as anthropology might be a useful tool for students, indicate dangers of misunderstanding and misapplying anthropological models. Huggan further warns that inaccurate views of what anthropology is and does may reinforce the misconceived notion that a literary text can provide unmediated access to a foreign culture. The discourse of the anthropological exotic places the foreign author in the position of having to represent their "culture as a whole". Bhabha's otherwise-welcome project of deconstructing nationalism(s) within world literature should come with reservations: although migrant, exiled, or displaced writers have become the sovereigns of world literature, they are still burdened with the function of representing their "cultural difference". Rosemary Coombe has written that only foreign authors are expected to do so, and are often critiqued while representing their "localities". No-one asks white authors who gives them the authority to speak about artistic licence or universal values. She writes further: "Those who have intellect are entitled to speak on behalf of universal principles of reason, whereas those who have culture speak only on behalf of a cultural tradition that must be unified and homogeneous before we will accord it any respect" (Coombe 1998:243).

Additionally, within this narrative of Otherness, Hal Foster (1995) has challenged not only the artist's role as a "native informant" but also the assumption that alterity is the primary point of subversion of dominant culture, which would imply that Bhabha's "freak displacements" automatically have access to transformative political power. In Foster's view, these assumptions risk the artist as ethnographer becoming part of "ideological patronage" (ibid.:302-3) and enable a cultural politics of marginality. His review of site-specific art with ethnographic mapping of a local community – a practice easily compared to world literature – has revealed that values such as authenticity, singularity, and originality, long banished through the postmodernist critique of art, come back as properties of the site or community. In this way the artist/writer's practice "is read not only as authentically indigenous but as innovatively political" (ibid.:307).

What are the long-term consequences in the politics of representation of small nations and world regions? And what happens to literature itself? The anthropological exotic, as a set of writing and reading practices, serves to celebrate the notion of cultural difference, yet it simultaneous-

ly assimilates that very foreignness into familiar Western interpretative codes. For a small nation whose literature is virtually unknown, such a marketing strategy provides space and a specific market-value on the international literary market, but that value is derived from its status as an object of intellectual tourism. This should be less a debate about the level of anthropological understanding of a foreign "culture" in the context of world literature, and far more a question of the specific material conditions under which such understandings are constructed. What really needs to be considered is how and in whose interests knowledge about foreign cultures is produced, both in general and more specifically in the context of literary production.

Conclusion

Though the conception and practices of world literature have changed since the 19th century, it has remained related to ideas of nationhood. Today, as the coherence of nation is continually questioned, we see migrants, exiles, and "in-between" writers fitting the position of representing their "culture". Although nation and home have been reconceptualised, images of stable and permanent "culture" – something that can be understood and consumed – are still employed in everyday practices of literary representations.

My ethnography from the *World Voices* festival questioned the concepts of *world* and *voice* as appropriated in the context of literary production, discussed the imperialist logic of the project of world literature that still perceives the world in evolutionist terms, and concluded that world literature today consists of Anglophone literature and translated Third World fiction, specifically written to provide ethnographic information about a foreign "culture". It also proved that, whereas English-speaking writers were not burdened with the role of representing any particular "culture", writers from small nations were expected to act as ambassadors of their "culture as a whole". This set of practices, which I called the anthropological exotic, positioned the foreign writer as a cultural broker who offered plenty of contextual background – the right type of foreignness – fashioned so as not to disrupt the dominant narrative of literary and cultural representations. Reading world literature as ethnography may give space and visibility to previously-neglected literary traditions. However, it also contributes to the commodification of cultural difference and the continued cultural imperialism of the whole project. Ultimately, to understand the project of world literature one must consider the broader social and

historical conditions that produce such a politics of representation of cultural difference and their consequences on the lives and works of foreign writers.

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