

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This study of world literature begins where many do: with Goethe, but then it will go backwards from Goethe before it goes forward. The term world literature itself derives from Goethe's neologism *Weltliteratur*, recorded by his personal secretary Johann Peter Eckermann from a conversation one night over dinner: "National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World-literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (165). The newness of the term is evidenced in John Oxenford's 1930 translation by the hyphenation that brings the compound concept over from German into English. World literature is now a commonplace in English, although what exactly it is remains a matter of debate, allowing for such titles as David Damrosch's book in 2003: *What Is World Literature?* But what Goethe means by world literature or what "we" mean by world literature today is not entirely my concern here—at least not yet—and this is where I go backwards from his neologism. In Eckermann's account, the conversation in which Goethe lets slip the word that will create a new field of study begins thus:

"Within the last few days, since I saw you," said he, "I have read many things; especially a Chinese novel, which occupies me still and seems to me very remarkable."

"Chinese novel!" said I, "that must look strange enough."

"Not so much as you might think," said Goethe; "the Chinamen [sic] think, act, and feel almost exactly like us..." (164)

Goethe goes on to explain the similarities and differences he finds between the “us” he refers to and Chinese writing and culture it represents, drawing connections between the Chinese text he has read and his own *Hermann and Dorothea* as well as the novels of Richardson and the *Chansons de Béranger*. Here Goethe is suggesting what world literature does, and many critics since then have produced readings of Goethe’s reading of the Chinese text to articulate a reading practice for world literature.

But what I want to call attention to here is not Goethe’s reading of the Chinese text but the fact itself that Goethe has read a Chinese text. Thus the question I pose is not, how has Goethe read the Chinese text (in the hermeneutic sense) but *how is it that Goethe was able to read the Chinese text?* The obvious answer—since Goethe had not studied Chinese—was that he was able to read the Chinese text because it had been translated, but this only begs the follow-up question: how is it that the Chinese text came to be translated? Why that text? Why that author? Why from Chinese? Why at that particular time and place? And how did the translation find its way into Goethe’s hands? The last question is complicated further by the fact that Goethe actually read a translation into French, not German.

What I want to emphasize is that what comes before Goethe’s reading of the Chinese text—the process of its selection, translation, publication, and distribution—is inseparable from that reading. Goethe’s conclusion that the Chinese “think, act, and feel almost exactly like us; and we soon find that we are perfectly like them, except that all they do is more clear, pure, and decorous than with us” (164) does not necessarily arise from the inherent qualities of the Chinese text or from his own subjective hermeneutics; rather, the process by which the text reached Goethe is also implicated. Has a text been

chosen for translation from Chinese literature that most closely resembles French or European cultural values? Has the translator interpreted and rephrased the text in French or European cultural terms? The fact that Goethe refers to what I have insisted calling a text as a *novel* already provides evidence of the way the book has been packaged and circulates in Europe. In response to Eckermann's question as to whether "this Chinese *romance* [is] one of their best," Goethe declares, "By no means . . . the Chinese have thousands of them, and when our forefathers were still living in the woods" (165, emphasis mine). Although the Germans were relatively late in literary developments in Europe, Chinese texts old enough to be written when the Germans were "still living in the woods" can only refer to literature before the arrival and adoption of the European genre of the novel in China. Not fitting into the genres circulating in Goethe's Germany, the Chinese text has been translated, packaged, and received according to European genre distinctions nonetheless.¹

The argument I want to make about the way world literature functions is not only implicated in the lead-up to Goethe's conversation with Eckermann, the "moment before" I have insisted on looking at so far. Rather, Goethe's discussion about the Chinese "novel" also contributes to and continues that process. He reinforces the classification of the Chinese text as a novel, he defines the Chinese way of life as "more clear, pure, and decorous" than the German one, and characterizes Chinese literature as relying on proverbs to convey moral lessons (164-65). What Goethe has to say about these things—as has been proven by the many readings and rereadings of his reading—matters to the way the Chinese text circulates later, and matters to the way other Chinese texts will be

¹ In German, Goethe uses the word "*Roman*," already a borrowing from French, which shows the way the genre circulated inside of Europe as well. On the way the novel traveled in Europe, see Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*, New York: Verso, 1999.

translated and circulate after it. If Chinese literature is understood as “decorous” and “moralizing,” for example, then texts might be selected and translated according to or against those criteria that will perpetuate or contradict the way Goethe’s Chinese novel circulates.

World literature does not just simply happen, then. Or, to use the formulation of Vilashini Cooppan, “World literature is not an ontology but an epistemology, not a known but a knowing” (“Ethics of World Literature” 38). As scholars and teachers of world literature, we need to interrogate not only the ways of knowing but also the ways in which what is available for knowing *becomes available* to us, a process inextricably linked in a feedback loop with our ways of knowing. Certainly world literature as a discipline has long wrestled with defining its object of study, laboring under the sheer enormity of the terms that make up its name: “world” and “literature.” The field grew out of and responded to the Great Books curriculum, which itself presented a set of “classics,” texts central to the development of civilization and society. The classics represented in Great Books classrooms revealed—and continue to reveal—a heavily Eurocentric bias, with civilization as we know it emerging from the Greeks and Romans. As Sarah Lawall demonstrates, early manifestations of world literature, as well as the Great Books courses from which they arose, relied on a teleological narrative of progress that pitted Western civilization against other civilizations that were either behind the times or lost in some mysterious other time (19-22). Such characterizations corresponded with the discourse of imperialism that justified conquest based on the idea that Western civilization was more advanced. Both the Great Books as well as the colonial paradigm, however, functioned by drawing some Eastern cultures, most notably in the form of the

Bible, into their narrative of progress in a gesture of incorporation. These acts of incorporation have not stopped, however, the construction of a dichotomy between the civilized, enlightened West and other parts of the world, between what has commonly come to be called the West and the rest.

In a later guise, the field of world literature moved forward in time and out somewhat, redefining itself as the study of “masterpieces” rather than “classics,” but far too many of the masterpieces remained within the confines of Europe, and further were penned all too often by a limited component of the European population: the Dead White European Male, the fall guy of attempts to widen the curriculum. Without throwing the DWEM out with the bathwater, the academy has acted to reverse its various antiquated biases—gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, regional, and so on. But the wider the base of texts becomes, the problem of curricular selectivity actually becomes even thornier, since we are trying to fit representatives of more types of texts into the same amount of class meetings and credit hours. If World Lit takes all literature of all the world as its object, how does an instructor construct an intro course?² Damrosch has called the latest world literature paradigm “windows on the world” (“Introduction” 3), but the World Lit instructor is faced with deciding which windows to open onto which parts of the world.

The question remains: which world and which literature? Damrosch has argued:

World literature surveys can never hope to cover the world. We do better if we seek to *uncover* a variety of compelling works from distinctive traditions, through creative combinations and juxtapositions guided by whatever specific themes and issues we wish to raise in a particular course. (“Introduction” 9, emphasis original)

Uncovering those compelling works is precisely what I would like to call attention to at this juncture—in a sense, this is the “moment before” of Goethe’s Chinese novel.

² By “World Lit” I mean the academic field of study instituted in mostly American universities.

Damrosch has set out the most commonly used designation of world literature at the moment: “I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (*What is World Literature?* 4). Thus for Damrosch, world literature is not all the literature of all the world but only that literature which crosses a border. Despite whatever history texts may have in their source culture, they do not exist in world literature until they have been read outside that culture. So how do texts circulate beyond their source culture? In response to Damrosch, Harish Trivedi has warned against taking the global circulation of texts for granted, where the scholar of world literature need possess only a “passive responsive capacity and readiness to whatever is washed up to our doorstep by the tides of global market forces or the quirks of literary transmission and translation” (“Transfiguring” 7). This project, too, aims to interrogate the idea that “important” or “deserving” texts will inevitably cross cultural and linguistic borders to find themselves on course lists, in anthologies, and on bookstore shelves. As translation scholar André Lefevere concludes, the circulation and reception of texts in a given cultural system does not depend on some ideal of “literary merit”; rather, “issues such as power, ideology, institution, and manipulation” come into play (*Translation, Rewriting* 2).

One important such issue is language itself, an issue related also to power, ideology, institution, and manipulation. Some languages possess more power than others and hold privileged positions within academic and market institutions. There are more Chinese speakers worldwide than English speakers, but English has become the lingua franca of global business. Similarly, universities and other schools employ English and French as the language of instruction outside the borders of nations where these are the

official or most commonly spoken languages, largely but not only due to the residues of colonial education systems. It is unsurprising, then, that a large proportion of authors from minority cultures who eventually circulate on a global scale are those that write in English. Indeed, earlier studies of the way minority literature circulates on the global market, such as Sarah Brouillette's *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, deal exclusively or mainly with Anglophone examples. This dissertation contributes to filling this gap in scholarship in its examination of the mechanisms by which minority literatures written in languages other than English circulate on the global market both inside and outside of the West.

Instructors, students, and readers of world literature thus do not have the entire history of all the texts ever written to choose among. There are vast numbers of texts of which they may not be aware or which they may not have access to for linguistic reasons. One of the means by which World Lit distinguishes itself as a field from Comp Lit is that the language of instruction and reading is usually English (in the American academy, where World Lit as a field mostly resides) as opposed to the original language of composition. Thus part of the selection process for readers and instructors of world literature has already been carried out *for* them by the availability of those texts in their language and the visibility of those texts on the cultural radar. Eugene Eoyang points to this as he defines different types of translation, including what he calls "surrogate" translations, where the reader is not expected to know the language in which the source text was written: a "difference between realizing and not realizing that something is missing, and it reminds us of the crucial importance between self-conscious and blithe ignorance. ... [A] work does not exist until it is translated in the significant target

language” (244-45). Texts such as these belong to what Margaret Cohen refers to as “the great unread” (cited in Moretti, 209). Like Goethe’s Chinese novel, we can only read what has been translated for us, and what we have available categories for.

This dissertation thus addresses what categories are available for texts translated from other languages as well as how the category of world literature itself is constituted. These concerns are to a large extent motivated by my own work as a translator of minority literature by Czech and Haitian writers, and thus as someone seeking to bring some of “the great unread” to the attention of Anglophone readers. The issue of how foreign literatures function *as* literature in a receiving literary system can guide the decisions translators, editors, and publishers make about the creation of the translated text. These decisions occur on all levels of the translation’s conception, production, and distribution, from the choice of a text to the choice of the cover art to the choice of certain words over others. When taken as a whole, these decisions combine to create a certain brand of literature that responds (in accordance with or against) current trends in the market and the academy.

In world literature, one such brand by which texts from other cultures circulate is otherness itself. Huggan, for example, speaks of “the booming ‘alterity industry’” (vii) which has resulted in “celebrity critics” like Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak (4). The phenomenon of celebrity writers preoccupies Huggan as it does Brouillette and Damrosch. Damrosch, for his part, has made the case that despite the expansion in the types of texts included in world literature, we have entered not an anticanonical phase but a hypercanonical one. He argues that the most “classic” texts continue to be taught, written, and talked about—“the rich have gotten richer”

(“Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age” 45)—and countercanonical texts have also remarkably found their way into the world literature discourse, but that the repercussions are a “shadow canon” of “old ‘minor’ authors who fade increasingly into the background” (45). New movements in the academy, like postmodernism, postcolonial studies, or gender studies, rather than making the hypercanonical texts irrelevant, become new lenses for focusing even more attention on them: “Like the Lexus, the high-end author consolidates his (much more rarely, her) market share by adding value from the postcanonical trends ...” (44-45). Meanwhile, the countercanonical texts, although they have made considerable inroads, still have done so in rather limited ways. One such phenomenon is the fact that often only one text from a given “minor” nation or language is included in an anthology to represent a culture as a whole, “as in some literary Miss Universe competition” (48). Even in nations or regions with extremely rich and varied literary output, the tendency is for one or two names only—the Salman Rushdies, Jorge Luis Borgeses, and J.M. Coetzees—to reach a relative level of recognition. As Damrosch writes, “it appears that postcolonial studies is reproducing the hypercanonical bias of older Europe-based fields” to create the “celebrity author” (49-50).

The celebrity author, Brouillette argues, has arisen naturally from a discursive shift in the Romantic era that paired notions of the individual genius of the author with the industrialization of literary production and a change in copyright law that favored the author’s intellectual property claims (see Chapter 3 on Kundera for a full discussion of this idea). With the emergence of authors, in the academy and the marketplace, as characters imbued with individual genius came an increased interest in their persons, or at least their personae, that would help to explain the origins of their genius and also help to

create a marketable genius figure. The latter phenomenon has only intensified as the total number of books for sale has multiplied. Brouillette describes a fractioning of the market into various niches and a corresponding call for authors to accommodate those niches not only by their writing but also by the image associated with it (65-70). Authors, then, do not simply write books; they also play an active part in marketing those books by assuming saleable public personae, such that they become as much of a commodity as their work. Brouillette then demonstrates how postcolonial authors engage actively in the market side of their professionalized careers, showing how they “do not seek to separate themselves from the commercial or economic spheres—the basis of those ‘corporately owned’ images—but rather to interact with various forms of politicized interpretation and reception that are imbricated with transnational culture and capital” (74).

As Damrosch argues, however, the market space for world literature authors, especially from postcolonial or minor literatures is rather small and usually only accommodates one author from each nation or region—Damrosch’s “literary Miss Universe competition.” Competition, then, can be fierce to accede to this privileged position where one’s work is selected for translation and circulation outside of its source culture. In this dissertation, I show how authors function as *agents provocateurs* to draw a maximum of attention and facilitate their earning the literary crown. Just as in any industry, controversial or contrarian positions generate press, and even negative press can be good press when it comes to name recognition and thus marketability. The more ink spilled over you, the better. The author’s provocation then becomes inseparable from the author as a figure and from his or her work, thus functioning as a kind of brand that the author, along with publishers, editors, and translators, can market. In some cases,

provocation functions as resistance—a way of saying “in your face”—but as Huggan contends, resistance is also a type of cultural currency. He examines the strategies of postcolonial scholars and authors who seek to resist the commodity fetishism of the global capitalist system when that very resistance becomes a commodity:

To what degree is the recognition—the cultural capital—of postcolonial writing bound up in a system of cultural translation operating under the sign of the *exotic*? What role do exotic registers play in the construction of cultural value, more specifically those types of value (re)produced by postcolonial products and (re)presented in postcolonial discourse? How are these exoticisms marketed for predominantly metropolitan audiences—made available, but also palatable, for their target consumer public? How, within this process, do *postcolonial* writers/thinkers contend with *neocolonial* market forces, negotiating the *realpolitik* of metropolitan economic dominance? How has the corporate publishing world co-opted postcolonial writing, and to what extent does the academy collaborate in similar processes of co-optation? (viii, emphases original)

Huggan’s questions prove useful to me here for the manner in which he brings out the value assigned to a text, what I will call its cultural currency, not as something inherent within the text itself but as something that emerges in the way it is marketed and received. Since Huggan deals mainly with global Anglophone literature, he focuses most often on the means by which authors themselves navigate these market forces, balancing between conformity and resistance to the roles expected from them and their writing, in this case as the postcolonial exotic. My work supplements Huggan’s, then, because I address the way the process of translation in particular complicates these negotiations in cultural currency across and even within borders. In the transaction between languages and cultures, how does translation add new types of resistance and/or co-optation? How does provocation function as a marketing strategy in differing cultures? How is a brand created in translation?

As Lawrence Venuti has shown, the percentage of published works in English that are translations falls far short of the proportion in other Europhone markets. Aside from a few celebrity author bestsellers, such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, or more recently Stieg Larsson, translations are generally considered to be poor sellers and thus financial risks by the large publishing houses. Since translations are thought to have little cultural currency in the U.S. and American readers are characterized as reluctant or even hostile toward works in translation, the marketing of the book often minimizes the fact that it was originally published in a different language, such as by not placing the translator's name on the book cover or title page and not including translator's notes. In one extreme example, an ad in the *New York Times* for an Isabel Allende novel boasted that the book was "also available in Spanish" for the growing Spanish-speaking minority in the U.S.³ Unlike with authors, the role that translators play in the brand of world literature is generally effaced.

The irony, then, is that one of the agents most heavily involved in the branding of the text largely go unremarked in terms of actual brand recognition. World literature in translation has its celebrity authors, but celebrity translators are indeed a scarcity—how many readers of Garcia Marquez, Allende, or Stieg Larsson can name their translators? There are, of course, some rare exceptions, but even then, the most well-known translators tend, in fact, to be celebrity authors themselves. Vladimir Nabokov, for example, produced his provocative translation of Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, a translation famous for tenaciously ignoring the form of Pushkin's poem in favor of its content, which Nabokov dreamed of explaining with "footnotes reaching up to the top of

³ Comment made by a speaker at the *Graduate Student Translation Conference* at the University of Iowa in October 2005.

this or that page to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity” (143). Ezra Pound’s translations of Chinese poetry in *Cathay* have been similarly provocative, although in this case for their lack of precision rather than their overzealous exactness. As Pound did not know Chinese and translated extremely freely from cribs, scholars still disagree whether his effort might best be called translation or adaptation.

The unconventional translations of *agents provocateurs* like Nabokov and Pound do not represent the reigning practice of Anglo-American translation. Venuti’s argument, now familiar in translation studies, is that the dominant model of translation in the American literary system is one that favors “fluency,” in which the highest praise accorded to a translation is that it reads as if it were originally written in the target language. Target language readers, then, have the impression that they are actually reading the original—not a translation—and that the “original” shows them a literary world like their own. Thus Venuti contends that the fluent model of translation enacts an imperialistic, ethnocentric violence on the source text:

By producing the illusion of transparency, a fluent translation masquerades as true semantic equivalence when it in fact inscribes the foreign text with a partial interpretation, partial to English-language values, reducing if not simply excluding the very difference that translation is called on to convey. (*Translator’s Invisibility* 21)

If foreign texts are translated in such a way as to be consistent with what the West claims are universal values, then the “foreign” text only supports, rather than challenges, that universality. The impression that the people of the source culture, like Goethe’s Chinese people, “think, act, and feel almost exactly like us” comes not necessarily from the source text but from the resulting translation. As I will argue in Chapter 5 using Judith Butler’s

notions of performativity and discourse, the source text performs the target culture's discourse.

To subvert this system of violent ethnocentric translation, Venuti favors a translation strategy that “signifies the difference of the foreign text ... by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language” (*Translator's Invisibility* 20). In this foreignizing model of translation, the reader is reminded that the translated text was in fact originally produced in another language in the context of another culture. We will see in Chapter 4 how Ngũgĩ enacted a sort of foreignizing translation in his early works even when the first language to hit the page was English. Ngũgĩ originally attempted to capture the syntax of African speech in the dialogue of his novels in order to indicate to his readers that the characters were actually speaking Gĩkũyũ and not English, thereby insisting on the local difference of the text in the face of the homogenizing universalism of the West that he criticizes. Since Ngũgĩ was writing in English but imagining a Gĩkũyũ conversation, he calls this type of translation a mental translation. He eventually abandoned the practice of foreignizing translation, even when he began writing his novels in Gĩkũyũ and translating them into English, since he felt that the advantages of the reader feeling an African syntactical rhythm were outweighed by the disadvantages of the characters sounding unnatural—both in relation to English and Gĩkũyũ—and thus naïve or unintelligent, which only played up, in the end, to the colonial march of progress narrative.

Venuti, however, promotes this type of two-way unnaturalness as he subscribes to Philip Lewis's idea of “abusive fidelity,” which “requires the invention of analogous means of signification that are doubly abusive, that resist dominant cultural values in the

target language, but supplement the foreign text by rewriting it in that language” (*Rethinking Translation* 12). The rendering of the text into a different language cannot help but be a violent act against that text, but in the foreignizing model, this violence is made apparent to the reader through the reciprocal violence against the target language and culture. Ngũgĩ’s mental translations of African syntax in his novels violate standard English in this way, even as the mental original *Gĩkũyũ* is violated by its transformation into the foreign English lexis. If violence is inevitable, according to Venuti, the freelance translator (an important qualifier in terms of his market-based model) only “exercises a choice concerning the degree and direction of the violence at work in any translating” (*Translator’s Invisibility* 19). Translation consequently becomes a weapon against the dominant ideology and poetics of the hegemonic target culture.

We can say, then, that rather than being mere currency converters, dealing in mathematical equivalences that do not exist, translators take on a privileged role as cultural brokers, negotiating the transactions between languages and cultures that involve not only questions of language but also questions of power. Furthermore, the agency with which translators act in Venuti’s model raises the visibility of the translation process such that it becomes a vital part of world literature as a brand. In this sense, then, translation can serve as a provocation in the form of subversive potential instead of being itself devalued, elided, and ignored in the Anglo-American literary system. The control translators exert, however, is far from absolute. Despite their efforts to brand their work, translators are sometimes restricted by editors and publishers who often have different ideas about the circulation of translations and may seek to limit the foreignness of the text, to follow target culture literary conventions, to adhere to sometimes stereotypical

expectations about the source culture, and to otherwise restrict the visibility of the translator, as discussed above in terms of the lack of prefaces, glossaries, or the even label “translation” on the cover of the book.

In her study on *Translating Milan Kundera*, for example, Michelle Woods uses an archive of letters between author, translators, and editors in order to reveal the negotiations determining what type of currency translations of Kundera’s work should draw on in English translation and how best to capitalize on it. One of these protracted conversations related by Woods involves a discussion between Kundera, translator Peter Kussi, and Alfred A. Knopf editor Nancy Nicholas on the subject of punctuation, which at first blush might appear rather banal (35-36). But Kundera in fact agonized over the replacement of semi-colons with periods in the translation of his book *Life is Elsewhere*. He had sent long letters to Kussi explaining his stylistics that entailed long, run-on sentences unusual in Czech. While Kussi attempted to preserve this effect in the English as a result, Nicholas was less convinced and demanded the punctuation replacements for clarity and to adhere to English stylistic norms. As Woods concludes, clearly influenced by Venuti, Nicholas favored “fluency” in English over a more experimental style that would abuse English punctuation standards. Rather than being a pedantic discussion, the debate about punctuation here exposes how the brand ascribed to Kundera’s texts in English was based rather on their content—which, as we will see in Chapter 3 was mainly considered a political one—than on their aesthetic value, all of which relates to the brand given to Czech writers in the Anglo-American system during the Cold War.

While I am using the economic metaphor of currency here, Venuti’s model instead relies on an economy of violence, pitting the inscription of hegemonic values

partial to the target culture against the disruptive translation partial to the source culture.⁴ Part of Venuti's aim here is to assert difference in the face of the ethnocentric imperialism of the Anglo-American literary system, but there are ways in which his model actually obscures difference. Firstly, violence tends to entail some kind of violation, i.e. a violation of something that was whole and absolute, such as the source text original or the hegemonic cultural codes. To imply that the Anglo-American target culture functions as a whole is to actually participate in its narrative of false universalism since difference within the target culture itself, and not just between the target and source cultures, is left out of the account. Denying a universalism to the West can involve subverting, as Ngũgĩ says, the West's tendency to "generaliz[ze] its experience of history as the universal experience of the world" (*Moving the Centre* 25). But we can also use translation to question the generalizing of the experience of history *within* the West itself. In economic terms, there is not an Anglo-American market but rather markets. The translator, editor, and publisher can make different choices depending on what type of cultural currency has value to the intended audience. Anthologies of Czech literature post-1989, as we will see in Chapter 5, for instance, brought out particular types of discourse, such as postmodernism or feminism, in the Czech source texts to attract certain types of Anglo-American readers. In the case of branding these texts as feminist or as falling under the category of women's writing, for example, texts were chosen that featured "women's issues" such as relationships, and the translators also paid special attention to words referring to the gender of the characters.

⁴ See my article "Translation as Peaceable Resistance" (*Norwich Papers* 18 (Nov. 2010): 115-26) for a full critique of Venuti's economy of violence and my alternative model of translation as subversion in the form of non-violent activism.

The example of post-1989 Czech literature shows that the same set of texts, or even the same text, can be used to signify different types of difference. It is important to consider, in the circulation of world literature, what type of differences we give currency to over others: between East and West, male and female, Third and First Worlds, between regions, nations, genres, authors, or particular texts. In Venuti's foreignizing translation, the cultural specificity of the source text is subordinated to the overall objective of signifying difference. The type of difference becomes irrelevant; it is only difference *as such*—subversion and opacity—that matter. While it may lead readers away from believing that foreign literature is just like literature in their own literary system, foreignizing translation can, however, potentially lead to a new normalization of what “foreign” literature is like. Gentzler compares Venuti to Gayatri Spivak in this regard, contending that the latter instead “help[s] the Western reader ‘imagine’ ... not an abstract, politically correct Other, but real cultural differences in its specific forms” (209). Spivak herself warns of the dangers of signifying difference on a large scale:

In the act of wholesale translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. This happens when all the literature of the Third World gets translated into a sort of with-it translatese, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan. (“Politics of Translation” 400)

Spivak's language here, as she writes of “wholesale” translation into a “with-it translatese” bespeaks the commodification of literature from the Third World into a fashionable market trend, where its difference, or at least a homogenized “Other” difference, is recuperated as a selling point.

According to Venuti, translations have the highest chance of circulating widely and winning praise when they minimize the foreignness of the text. If world literature has

been circulating more recently under the paradigm of the “window on the world,” then, we might say that readers in the Anglo-American literary system prefer to look at the world through their own windows, that is, in such a way that the foreign is actually reflected back to them in their own terms. In opposition to this domesticating type of translation, Venuti supports foreignizing translation that celebrates difference. What I want to highlight here is that Venuti is also looking at the world from the vantage point of his own window, even as he promotes difference. We see in his theoretical model his debt to the climate of poststructuralism and postmodernism in the academy, with its emphasis on exposing the trace of signification and showing that all interpretation is contingent and incomplete. For Venuti, the domesticating translation makes interpreting the text too easy for the reader, and so he wants to force the reader to not only think before “understanding” but also to think about the fact that he or she doesn’t understand everything. Such a translation practice implies not only signifying foreign elements in the target text and abusing the literary and linguistic standards of the source language and culture but also choosing texts that facilitate these processes. The translators, editors, and publishers of the post-1989 Czech anthologies explored more fully in Chapter 5, for example, selected texts for their collections that deal with such postmodern conventions as capitalist dystopia, material and semiotic excess, and hypermediatization as well as with postmodernism’s interest in the Baroque in a reaction against the modernism that followed it. With postmodernism as a brand with cultural currency in the Anglo-American literary system, especially nearly twenty years ago when these anthologies were released, the Czech texts included in the anthologies performed the discourse of postmodernism in order to capitalize on the contemporary cultural and literary values, in

particular among a certain segment of the population that serves as readers of world literature.

By favoring a certain mode of translating and of selecting texts, however, we run the risk of creating a brand of “foreign” literature in English with its own set of normalized norms. In this case, foreign literature appears always to be resistant to American literary conventions, always to be “difficult,” always to favor hybridity and the free play of the signifier. We end up creating a foreign literature that is just as much in our own image—as postmodern, postcolonialist Western academics—as the “fluent” translations Venuti so derides. Texts, translated or otherwise, do not have an inherent value in themselves, only the value we grant them depending on the types of currency that are operative for us. Those currencies in turn derive from our positionality, and by “position” I intend both the sense of placement and also point of view or opinion, which combine to locate an agent in the network of agents who negotiate the circulation of world literature. Barbara Herrnstein Smith has demonstrated how these two aspects of positionality, placement (or what she calls identity) and point of view (what she calls evaluation), overlap:

Our interpretation of a work and our experience of its value are mutually dependent, and each depends upon what might be called the psychological “set” of our encounter with it: not the “setting” of the work or, in the narrow sense, its context, but rather the nature and potency of our own assumptions, expectations, capacities, and interests with respect to it—our “prejudices” if you like, but hardly to be distinguished from our own identity (or *who*, in fact, *we are*) at the time of the encounter. Moreover, all three—the interpretation, the evaluation, and the “set”—operate and interact in the same fashion as the hermeneutic circle itself: that is, simultaneously causing and validating themselves *and* causing and validating each other. (10-11, emphasis original)

What I would like to emphasize in the agents’ identity or position are not demographical data such as gender, race, or class, although these aspects are of course

important, shaping our discourse and getting shaped by our discourse. Of interest to me here, rather, are other positionalities which evoke a network of hierarchies. This interest in agency and hierarchies derives, for example, from my own position as a translator of Czech and Caribbean French to English (and thus from periphery to center) and as a scholar in the fields of translation studies, postcolonial studies, and gender studies at a time when these fields intersect in the American academy with postmodern and poststructural theory. My approach and my examples originate from this position and raise larger questions which are, for me, at the heart of the circulation of world literature: questions of center/periphery, colonized/colonizer, politics/aesthetics, East/West, and North/South. As Vilashini Cooppan notes, “any map presents the global as a local utterance, for any attempt to *represent* ‘the world’ inevitably bespeaks the mapmaker’s own placement” (“World Literature and Global Theory” 13, emphasis original). The map I present here of world literature is no exception; a formulation of world literature depends on the discourses current at the time, for Goethe as for myself. As Immanuel Wallerstein argues in terms of what he calls “world-systems,” the agents in the system “are not primordial elements, but part of a systemic mix out of which they emerged and upon which they act. They act freely, but their freedom is constrained by their biographies and the social prison of which they are a part” (21). Although the agents can never completely break free from their prisons, analysis of their situation within the world-system enables freedom to the greatest extent possible. Accordingly, I here analyze the types of discourse involved in the negotiation of world literature at the moment, pointing not only to the way they help to map world literature today but also to the way that world literature as a concept can help to constitute them in turn.

As we have seen through the work of Venuti, the mass market for translation into English trades in texts that read as if they were originally written in English and that present a domesticated version of the source culture. Venuti has been among those spearheading a movement in the academy to challenge this type of translation in favor of a practice that makes visible both the process of translation and difference from the target culture's aesthetic and cultural codes. In contemporary translation studies as a field, then, currency is accorded to the kinds of texts that enable these practices: multilingual texts that show the interpenetration of languages, multicultural texts that show the presence of minorities in supposedly homogeneous populations, multinational texts that show the interaction of cosmopolitan subjects with various places, peoples, and ideas. Steven Ungar's contribution to the American Comparative Literature Association latest state-of-the-discipline report in 2006 provides a characteristic example of such a text. Just as many of the essays in the collection deal with the state of fields and discourses related to Comparative Literature, such as feminism, *francophonie*, visual arts, and medieval studies, Ungar's paper serves as the representative of current trends in translation studies. After introducing some of the most important recent contributions to translation studies—by Venuti as well as by Spivak and Sherry Simon, who works particularly on the connections between translation, feminism, and postcolonial studies—Ungar advances the work of Maghrebi author Abdelkebir Khatibi, a Moroccan educated in French, as exemplary of the “economy of difference and logic of transmission” Ungar sees as central to the field (131). According to Ungar, Khatibi's “*pluri-langue*” and “*bi-langue*” texts such as *Love in Two Languages* mobilize more than one language at the same time to “[recast] translation less as a process leading to transparency in the target language

than as a confrontation in which multiple languages and cultures square off against each other and ‘*meet without merging ... without a reconciling osmosis or synthesis*’ (132, emphasis original). Not only does Khatibi’s Maghrebi text put Arabic and French—East and West—into relation with each other, but it also shows how

... the irreducible difference of language ... links the geohistorical location of the Maghreb between Orient, Occident, and Africa as a crossing of the global in itself to a condition in which the regional languages of classical Arabic, its local dialects, French, and Spanish contain the inscription of the other languages that surround and inhabit it. (134-35)

The choice of Khatibi to exemplify an “economy of difference” in translation not only *between* cultures but also *within* cultures demonstrates the currency of concepts like hybridity, *métissage*, cosmopolitanism, and creolization in the Western academy. These concepts make evident the constant transactions that brand cultural artifacts like literature. Capital can be amassed, stored up, while currency is put to use, circulates, participates in exchanges. Thus literatures, nations, and cultures are constituted not simply in the accumulation of artifacts but also through contact with other literatures, nations, and cultures, displaying the permeability of cultural markets. Even hegemonic cultures such as the American one are not monolithic but pervaded by the wide range of transactions occurring within and across their borders.

There is a danger in an uncritical celebration of hybridity, however, especially if it does not take account of the power dynamics between the different forms of currency involved. John Milton and Paul Bandia write, for example, of the incursion of minority subjects into majority cultures through the process of translation: “Many minority cultures have survived the onslaught of dominant global languages through a deliberate translation of themselves into such global languages, which they subvert through

innovative linguistic practices to assert their identity on the world stage” (3). These “translated men,” to use Rushdie’s term, however, seem to always be the ones doing the translating of themselves; the Other is forced to speak in the language of the West, even if that speech might be subversive. As Trivedi notes through the example of British writer Hanif Kureishi, cultural translation is “not the need of the migrant but rather more of a requirement of the society and culture to which the migrant has travelled; it is a hegemonic Western demand and necessity” (“Translating Culture” 196). The West as a site of translation and circulation for non-Western cultures can also represent its cultural dominance in terms of a consecratory function. Raneer Kaur Bannerjee claims:

The First World is increasingly becoming the home of the Western-educated, Third World intellectual. At home only in the language of the First World, these intellectuals are best heard in the West. This is where they are published, where their work is appreciated, where they get international exposure and recognition, this is where they *want* to be heard. ... It is the best position from which a postcolonial writer can challenge popular myths and misrepresentations about his or her culture ... (197, emphasis original)

While Bannerjee is certainly correct that Third World intellectuals have migrated in large numbers to the First World, their position there is much more fraught. As discussed above in terms of Huggan’s *Postcolonial Exotic*, resistance to the alterity industry is often itself recuperated as a commodity in that industry. Bannerjee’s conclusions about the “best” position for Third World intellectuals also involves sweeping suppositions about these intellectuals’ cultural function and the audience they seek to reach. She assumes that the role Third World intellectuals have to play in world literature is to write for other cultures in order to correct misunderstandings *about* their own culture rather than to write *for* their own culture. Ngũgĩ (Chapter 4) disputes claims such as Bannerjee’s by his switch to writing novels in Gĩkũyũ after already having achieved cultural currency as a

novelist in English, although his books are still available to the Anglophone world through translation. Furthermore, by promoting the translation of literature not only between a minor and major language but also between minor languages, Ngũgĩ disrupts the conception of world literature as a centralized market where everything passes through the West and particularly through the United States.

This cultural hegemony of the U.S. has been bemoaned as a homogenization of world culture, what we might call a McDonaldization or Wal-Martization of diverse cultural productions. Such warnings should not go unheeded. Certainly the figures show that texts are translated from English at a much higher rate than into English. Unlike Rushdie's "translated men," it is assumed that the West does not need to translate itself; it is always already understandable. Such a formulation only underpins the universalizing gesture in Western discourse by not accounting for the difference types of brands that circulate in the West itself. Furthermore, too often the assumption is made that texts coming into English are ethnocentrically domesticated, while texts going out of English reach all corners of the world unmediated by the translation or transaction process since these texts are easily digestible bits of "universal" culture. Trivedi, for example, has decried the fact that the academy has made pointing out instances of Orientalism its fetish, but has not made the same strides in bringing to the fore moments of Occidentalism (Das 39). In other words, the Western academy can pat itself on the back for showing the ways it has oppressed the East, but in so doing, and in limiting itself to this direction of cultural transfer, it maintains the East in its passive, victimized role, and therefore only practices a different type of Orientalism. However, as we shall see in Chapter 5 which deals in part with the import of Western feminism into the Czech

Republic, other cultures do not accept Western discourse unfiltered but rather create their own brands out of them. In this particular case, because of a different social and literary history, Czechs find that one size does not fit all when it comes to feminism and therefore translate Western women's writing so that it performs its feminist discourse differently in the Czech context.

Because of the location of World Lit in the American academy for the most part, these distinctions between the West as producer of discourse—of feminism, of postmodernism, of postcolonialism—and East as receiver of discourse are generally reinforced in the curriculum. But as Eoyang asks, “Is there really any such thing as ‘non-Western’ literature, or is that denomination merely a reflection of Western ethnocentricity?” (258). The Great Books and masterpieces of the older, competing forms of world literature tend to appear on current World Lit syllabi as “Classic plus its derivative(s)”—or not to appear at all. That is, the Western texts remain in the national departments—English, French, German, etc.—while non-Western texts find their way into the curriculum through World Lit courses, which end up functioning as a big box marked: miscellaneous Other. In this sense, world literature becomes a euphemism for non-European literature, postcolonial literature, Third-World literature, or for Anglophone literature other than British and American. Thus, while world literature allows for an opening up of the university-wide humanities curriculum to literatures once and still often excluded, it also, in its current guise, reinforces certain geocultural formulations. Aijaz Ahmad, who like Trivedi is based in India, addresses one of these formulations: “It is useful, therefore, to demystify the category of ‘Third World Literature,’ which is emerging in the metropolitan university now as something of a

counter-canon and which—like any canon, dominant or emergent—does not really exist before its fabrication” (45). Such that, even as we strive to be more inclusive in world literature, the paradigms by which we do so are by no means intuitive; we draw from older paradigms, and end up underpinning them. Indeed, the very fact that one body of literature is asked to operate as a counter-canon means that there must also already exist a canon. The counter-canon posits itself against the canon; it does not explode it.

Haitian-born Canadian author Dany Laferrière, the subject of Chapter 2, attempts to earn his place in world literature not only by trading in different types of cultural currency depending on the context of the literary transaction but also by marketing himself as a celebrity author even before the fact, creating a rock-star image and making the most of television gigs. The flexibility with which Laferrière handles various markets provides evidence of the way that the value of texts is constituted not in the text itself but in the transactions of reading, interpreting, rewriting, translating, and editing, among others. We have a choice as to which types of cultural currency are capitalized on in order to move the text into circulation. The same goes for the teaching of World Lit where the text might be given value according to a number of current discourses, such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, or feminism, as discussed above. World literature courses are often taught according to genre, theme, or region in order to make sense of the huge body of material at hand, and each of these models further involves creating a particular sort of commodity out of the text. The generic model tends to rely on Western genre categories such as the novel, tragedy, or poetry. Not only do these categorizations make certain formal assumptions, they also involve evaluative assumptions as well. That is, instead of considering a text which almost-but-not-quite conforms to the generic

conventions of (great) epic as something other than an epic, there may be a tendency to consider it as just not a very good epic, a failed epic, a derivative epic. We shall see, for example, in Chapter 3 how Milan Kundera insists on Europe as the context by which all novels should be evaluated and how this reinforces the cultural march of progress described above, in which European models of writing are considered more advanced. If texts from other places do not fit neatly into Western genres, they may get excluded from the umbrella category of literature altogether. This is particularly the case with oral forms of literature. Currently the category of orature, written literature based on spoken forms such as the folktale, are making headway in world literature syllabi, but oral texts that go untranscribed will circulate with more difficulty. These texts will continue to be what we might call after Cohen “the great unlistened to.” On the other hand, for texts that *have* been translated, that process of translation often involves rewriting of the source text according to the target culture’s generic norms, as with Goethe’s Chinese “novel.”

The thematic organizational model, in which texts from various parts of the world are put in conversation around a particular topic, can create a comfortable sense of universalism in which there may be some variations in how we approach certain things, but at heart we are all concerned by the same things and thus deep down are really all alike. The regional organizational model, on the other hand, may incline toward ethnographic readings of the texts, such that a text or two from a certain region are taken to show what life is like in those parts, Damrosch’s “window on the world.” Such an approach, I argue, limits the aesthetic potential of the text in favor of the informational one; content supersedes form. Even when the means of expression is also given attention, the Other card poses further problems when placed on the World Lit table. As Cooppan

explains while discussing her introductory course, “My students ... were on the verge of a romantic attraction to otherness and a well-intentioned desire to turn admiration for other cultures, literatures, and aesthetic practices into a shorthand ‘understanding’ of the other ...” (“Ethics of World Literature” 35). If one of the goals of world literature is to show readers that other people, other places, and other cultures may have different ways of being, speaking, doing, and thinking, there is, as Cooppan notes, the danger that readers take the insights they gain as complete and the information in the text as unmediated and objective.

As will be more fully discussed in Chapter 3, Martinican theorist, novelist, and poet Édouard Glissant has compared the act of understanding to one of appropriation and assimilation, of reducing the Other to our own terms. Certainly understanding in this sense is to be avoided in the World Lit classroom. Yet swinging the pendulum too far in the other direction by making everything difficult, opaque, elusive and by eliminating paths of access to the texts and the worlds they describe would cripple the ideals that the field of world literature, whose aim has always partly been, and should remain to be, unapologetically humanist. Students will simply end up frustrated with a course in which they feel they haven’t *learned* anything, and it would be wrong to break a ruler against their curiosity. And there is also quite a bit more at stake in world literature, which allows for the textual meeting of cultures that are also meeting on the market, in international bodies of governance, and quite possibly on the battlefield. Indeed, Cooppan feels she made the biggest impact with her world literature course when they coincidentally were reading *The 1001 Nights* during the 2003 Iraq invasion. *The 1001 Nights* had thus gained a new sort of currency due to events on the world political stage, and that currency could

be mobilized to give the students and Cooppan a different way of looking at the people who had found themselves occupied by our troops. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, Laferrière's book *Tout bouge autour de moi* on the 2010 Haitian earthquake, allows for this same opportunity to build a relationship based on empathy with a culture usually treated as a dark Other. It is my supposition that, with tragic irony, the earthquake in combination with Laferrière's recent prestigious French literary prize may finally bring about his American success, evidence that the perfect storm of opportunities is sometimes necessary for texts to travel. Yet Laferrière's work has already been circulating for years in various other world markets. He had risen to overnight fame in his adopted country of Quebec through his cheeky television antics and brazen literary reflections on the intersection of race and sex. It took some time, however, for him to refine his brand into one that sells in various other markets. By outlining the traffic of his texts across time and space, I present the Western system as a network of literary centers—and thus opportunities—rather than an all-or-nothing, undifferentiated whole.

Whereas in cases like Laferrière's writers may wait decades for an opening in the market, in other cases they face a loss of interest from a once-receptive audience. During the Cold War, Czech authors dissident to the communist regime enjoyed success in the U.S. as their texts were recuperated into the Western politico-ideological position. How could these same writers, however, maintain their currency after the fall of the Berlin Wall? Chapter 3 (East is East, East is West) looks at Kundera, who capitalized on his pre-1989 success by vehemently opposing the branding on which it was based. Kundera, in his essays and interviews, attempts to redraw the boundaries of world literature in order to place himself within a tradition that allows him to be more than just a political writer. I

show how he sets forth a grand history of the European novel in such a way as to give himself a privileged position within it and thus a larger literary franchise.

While the texts discussed in the first two chapters move around and finally into the vast, lucrative Anglo-American market, the work of Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ could be said to have journeyed into this center and then back into the periphery. Ngũgĩ first garnered acclaim in the West for English-language texts, but defiantly declared in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) that he would write henceforth only in his native Gĩkũyũ, an announcement made, significantly, in English. Chapter 4 (Opportunity Knocks Back) is unique to Ngũgĩ studies in that I here treat him not only as a writer but also as a translation theorist in tune with the hierarchies of languages as well as those of culture, genre, or texts. Ngũgĩ's stance on translation and textual production proves more nuanced than his dogmatic pronouncements, and so we see this *agent provocateur* actually compromising with the agents of globalization involved in literary circulation.

Writers like Ngũgĩ and Kundera of the Cold War generation converted political relevance into broader literary significance, but authors whose texts had not already been translated pre-1989 lack that base level of cultural capital. In Chapter 5 (Not Kundera's Sisters), I look at the work of anthology editors and publishers who are bringing Czech women authors into circulation by a brand shift away from politics toward gender studies. Through a close reading of the paratextual presentation of the anthologies, I assess how they conform to these paradigmatic expectations. The shift toward women's writing in Czech literature abroad helps to rectify the literary gender imbalance at home, but it also poses the problem of new, potentially essentializing expectations as to how and about what these women "should" write.

CHAPTER 2

Dany Laferrière: How Not to Conquer America in One Night

Dany Laferrière gave viewers who had tuned in to see the weather one day in 1988 more than they had bargained for: a forecast presented in the nude. Laferrière was already no stranger to provocation in his adopted city of Montreal, to which he had immigrated eight years earlier from Haiti. In 1986, he had created a *succès de scandale* with his first novel, or rather with the title alone of his first novel: *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* [*How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*]. The book launched Laferrière into the limelight of both the popular media as well as Canadian scholarly journals, after which he made what would at first seem the unlikely transition from literature to meteorology. And yet the incident of the bare Laferrière telling his viewers whether or not they would need an umbrella actually crystallizes the place he has carved out for himself in Quebec as an inescapable cultural figure. While he might appear to be simply playing the clown in his goofy weather segment, Laferrière was in fact doing what he has always done: wrapping the heavy questions of race, class, and sex into the guise of entertainment, and then throwing it all into his viewers', or readers', face.

It certainly matters, for example, that the naked body on display to the Quebec audience is black. Western modern discourse has created a dichotomy between the

enlightened, cerebral European and the primitive, corporeal Other.⁵ The European in Africa configured the manners of dress or undress of Africans as a sign of their primal animal nature, which in part allowed the colonizer to justify the practice of slavery. And the nakedness of the slaves—in their crossing of the Atlantic on the slave ships, in their arrival in the New World colonies—became a sign of their abjection. Haiti, Laferrière’s native land, remains to a large extent in Western discourse a nation not of people but of abject bodies. A string of violent regimes (not least of which being the Duvaliers in the 20th century), vodou practices, legends of cannibalism, the high incidence of HIV/AIDs, and poverty so extreme that people have been known to eat dirt in order to appease their hunger—all these construct Haiti as a land where the corporeal and not the cerebral takes precedence.⁶ The exposed black body further signifies carnality. Exoticism and eroticism often go hand in hand; one need only think of Josephine Baker. It is on this very discourse that Laferrière’s first novel plays, as the title so clearly suggests, taking to the absurd extreme the stereotype of the sexualized black male let loose among a white female population.

In his sexual conquests, the narrator of *Comment faire l’amour...* announces his presence among the white Canadian population with fanfare, quite like Laferrière himself in his unorthodox weather forecast. His job as a morning weatherman on the new station Télévision Quatre Saisons (now TQS) made him the first black person to work for the news at a major Quebec network. With his widespread public appearances on the television screen, Laferrière thus rendered visible the changing face of the Canadian

⁵ Classic examples include G. W. F. Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837) and Count Arthur de Gobineau’s *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853-55).

⁶ See for example, J. Michael Dash, *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination* (NY: St. Martin’s, 2nd ed., 1997), especially “The Art of Darkness: Writing in the Duvalier Years” (101-134); and Part III (Affective Cultural Translation: Haitian *Vodou*) in Madelaine Hron’s *Translating Pain* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2009, 133-184).

population and the movement toward more institutionalized multiculturalism, starting with policies enacted in 1971 such as the creation of the Multiculturalism Directorate and the Canadian Council on Multiculturalism.⁷ Since TQS portrayed itself as a fresh alternative to the older Quebecois channels, it is not surprising that Laferrière's groundbreaking entry into a new multicultural televised newsroom should happen there, and that they would allow him such irreverent behavior. That irreverence functions much like his novels in creating out of Laferrière a dual insider-outsider figure in his new country. On the one hand, his cheeky weather forecast endears him to his viewers, not unlike a class clown. The fact that he makes the weather fun and funny also falls along the old stereotype of the black entertainer, which neutralizes the potentially perceived threat from the black population, again with all its associations of corporeality and primality that in this case some whites fear may be unleashed against them. But as much as Laferrière assuages those fears by goofing off in front of the camera, he also paradoxically revives those fears in his unabashed self-exposure, in the unapologetic way he engages in behavior normally considered inappropriate, in his sheer in-your-faceness. The "threatening" black male in his nakedness has surprised you in your living room; the immigrant black male is in your country, and he's going to do as he likes.

The performativity of Laferrière's position in a multicultural Canada relates to Graham Huggan's concept of "staged marginality," a term he adapts from sociologist Dean MacCannell's "staged authenticity":

Staged marginality ... denotes the process by which marginalised individuals or social groups are moved to dramatise their 'subordinate' status for the benefit of a majority or mainstream audience. Staged marginality is not necessarily an

⁷ On Canadian multiculturalism, see for example, Graham Huggan's chapter "Exoticism, ethnicity and the multicultural fallacy" in his *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (NY: Routledge, 2001, 124-154).

exercise in self-abasement; it may, and often does, have a critical or even a subversive function. (87)

Such is the instance of the naked weather forecast: a mainstream Quebec audience viewing the exposed black clown, who nonetheless disquiets at the same time as he entertains. As we will see later in this chapter, this tactic runs throughout Laferrière's work, where it is often his marginal status in North American society that comes to the fore. In staging his marginality in order to gain viewers and readers, Laferrière participates in what Huggan calls the "alterity industry" as an example of the "postcolonial exotic":

The postcolonial exotic is an effect of commodification, but it is not simply reducible to the cultural logic of consumer capital ... In a sense, it might be seen as a congeries of strategic exoticisms, designed to show the workings of the globalised alterity industry and to repoliticise exotic categories of the cultural other as an unsettling force. The language of resistance is entangled, like it or not, in the language of commerce; the anti-colonial in the neocolonial; postcolonialism in postcoloniality. What remains—in this context at least—is to lay bare the workings of commodification; for the postcolonial exotic is both a form of commodity fetishism *and* a revelation of the process by which 'exotic' commodities are produced, exchanged, consumed; it is both a mode of consumption *and* an analysis of consumption. Cultural products operating under the sign of this 'exotic' are likely to raise the challenging question: what is really exotic about me? (264)⁸

Huggan sees the discomfort of these postcolonial authors in their fraught relationship with the alterity industry, where their very articulations of resistance are what give them their market appeal. Once critical and/or popular success has been achieved, however, these authors will have a larger and more attentive audience to whom to voice their

⁸ Huggan draws the distinction between postcoloniality and postcolonialism wherein postcoloniality represents the material and ideological situation in the period after outright imperial colonization and postcolonialism represents a way of thinking that critiques that situation: "Postcoloniality, put another way is a value-regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange. Value is constructed through global market operations involving the exchange of cultural commodities and, particularly, culturally 'othered' goods. ... Postcolonialism, by contrast, implies a politics of value that stands in obvious opposition to global processes of commodification" (6).

ambivalence about the position they have reached. The postcolonial exotic thus must, in a sense, play the market in order to resist the market, at the same time that resisting the market can be recuperated as playing the market. Throughout this chapter, we will see how Laferrière throws his marginality in the reader's face, insisting that he and his work should not be ghettoized with exotic labels. At the same time, his insistence upon dredging up the question of exoticization forms the backbone of much of his work, and thus becomes one of the major features that attracts readers.

If, however, Laferrière might serve as a representative of the postcolonial exotic, he makes for an interesting case study by which to explore the limits of the term. For if he is "postcolonial," which colony is he "post" to, as a Haitian residing in Quebec? During the colonial era, Haiti passed hands several times among the European powers but eventually fell under the control of France and became its most profitable colony. But it also became one of the first ex-colonies when the slaves rebelled and won their independence in 1804. Although they gained their independence a century and a half before the African colonies or India, the after-effects of colonialism have had incredible lasting power, not least because France recognized Haiti's independence only in 1825 and under the condition that it pay indemnities to the French government for the losses incurred by the plantation owners, leading Haitian writer Jean Métellus to joke acerbically that "Haiti inaugurated Third World debt" (218). In the 20th century, however, Haiti has experienced a colonial-type relationship rather with the United States, which occupied the island from 1915 to 1934 and interfered significantly in Haitian politics twice recently, first by covertly helping to overthrow Haiti's first democratically elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991, and then by more publicly restoring him to

power with an invasion in 1994. Further, neocolonial imperialism in the form of foreign capitalist interests comes from America but also from other industrialized nations such as Germany and France who seek cheap manufacturing labor.

So when he immigrated from Haiti to Quebec in 1976, Laferrière ended up on the soil of a nation that had no (neo)colonial past or present with his homeland. The result places him outside the typical paradigm of the (ex)colonized migrating to the metropole of the (ex)colonizer. While hardly intentional—Laferrière notes he had only 48 hours to arrange his departure once he learned his life was in grave danger from the State—the author has found the choice extremely fortuitous:

Quebec is one of the rare countries of the north to not have a colonial past (ok, there's the Indian problem, but if you're looking for perfection in this world, my friend, you risk being disappointed).⁹ Thanks to this exceptional situation (Quebecers present themselves as the white Negroes of America) I was able to avoid the endless, annoying debates about colonialism, which is what's on the program every day for Senegalese writers in France or Pakistanis in England. (*Je suis fatigué* 111)¹⁰

Laferrière thus feels he has been able to escape what he sees as the suffocating expectations assigned to postcolonial authors living in former colonial nations. There is no score to settle between the Haitian and the Quebecer, no old injustices to work through and rectify. For Laferrière, the fact of colonialism limits the work of postcolonial authors to pointing out those injustices and limits the work of ex-colonial readers to accepting their responsibility for them. The only subject matter allowed for postcolonial literature, in this formulation, is postcoloniality. “No dialogue is possible with a subject like that at the center,” Laferrière argues, even in “a simple daily conversation gangrened by the

⁹ Laferrière deals with “the Indian problem” in his prose-poem novel *A Drifting Year* through the character of the narrator’s Native American co-worker: “Being Indian is worse / than being black in America. / You can’t even claim / you came from / somewhere else” (79).

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted in the Bibliography, all translations are mine.

historical reminders of one party and the guilt of the other. ... The most anodyne question makes direct reference to colonialism” (*Je suis fatigué* 112). By immigrating to Quebec, Laferrière can instead slip outside this bilateral configuration of identity, giving him flexibility in his role as a writer, cultural critic, and citizen.

But if Laferrière’s position in Quebec society is not neatly determined by the colonizer-colonized paradigm, it only raises more questions about who he is and how he and his writing relate to their context. Despite the artistic freedom he argues his unique immigration has offered him, many of the concerns in his writing are shared by postcolonialism and have shaped the creation and reception of his work in significant ways. In this sense, postcolonialism is not a historical situation but a set of larger issues related especially to power structures of race, class, economics, and politics. So if Laferrière’s condition does not actually put the questions of postcoloniality aside, it allows a means to look at them less bilaterally and to see the power structures at issue as overlapping and sometimes contradictory rather than as a simple ladder of one-over-one. It is precisely the context of Quebec and Laferrière’s position within it that illustrates such a complex of hierarchies, giving a richer vision of postcoloniality and thus of the role of the postcolonial writer.

When Laferrière set foot on Canadian soil, he found himself in a postcolonial context far removed from the First World-Third World paradigm. A different imperialist state of affairs plays itself out within the borders of Canada itself, and Laferrière made his entrance there at a key moment in that history. As he notes in the quote above, Quebecers portray themselves as “the white Negroes of America,” pointing to their relatively powerless minority status within the larger contexts of Canada and North America as a

whole. The French-speaking population of Quebec has tenaciously defended its identity against the hegemonic Anglophone majority, sometimes violently as happened in the decade preceding Laferrière's immigration. The separatist group the *Front de libération du Québec* set off 95 bombs from 1963 to 1970, including one in the Montreal Stock Exchange. In October of 1970, they kidnapped two government officials, which provoked the central Canadian government to invoke the War Measures Act exceptionally during peacetime, permitting the arrest of citizens without a warrant and the deployment of the military. The population favored less violent means of supporting Quebec's independence, electing the separatist *Parti Québécois* to power in the provincial government in 1976, the year Laferrière arrived. Rather than finding himself in a powerful imperialist country, then, he was instead located among a population engaged in its own national liberationist struggle not unlike those of the Third-World ex-colonies.

The Francophone/Anglophone power divide plays itself out particularly in Montreal, Laferrière's adopted city, where the English-speaking minority has historically enjoyed an economic and cultural elite status, embodied in its elevated geographic position on the top of Mont Royal. Sherry Simon, a translation scholar interested in postcolonial issues particularly through the example of Montreal, describes it as a "divided city" where "the crosstown voyage ... is always a voyage across languages" (*Translating Montreal* 7). These types of voyages figure significantly into Laferrière's *Comment faire l'amour...*, where the crosstown voyage plays out not so much as horizontal but vertical movement. Since the narrator's sexual conquests consist of Anglophone women, their relations require a journey by the narrator "up" into the affluent, privileged Anglophone space or a journey by the female lover "down" into the

poor neighborhood of the narrator's tiny, filthy apartment. That neighborhood, although on the Francophone side of the city, also contained a growing immigrant population, including of course, Laferrière's narrator. It is here that the question of language, power, and colonialism becomes more complicated, for neither is French the narrator's native language. Laferrière describes the situation in terms of his own writing:

I arrive in Montreal and immediately fall into the national debate: language. I had just, not five hours ago, left in Haiti a vicious debate on language where French symbolized the colonizer, the powerful one, the master to be uprooted from our collective unconscious, only to find myself in another, no less vicious debate where French represented, this time, the victim, the downtrodden, the poor colonized demanding justice. And English the reviled master. The all-powerful Anglo-Saxon. Which to choose? Which camp to head for? My former colonizer French, or English, the colonizer of my former colonizer? (*Je suis fatigué*, 130)

In this context, then, the distinctions between major and minor languages become blurred, and the ethical choice of which language to use—as a means of resistance against colonial imposition—becomes thornier.

Interestingly, in Laferrière's presentation of his dilemma, his native language of Creole does not even register as a possible choice. To write in Creole would mean limiting oneself to a small Haitian immigrant population within Canada in addition to possible exports to other immigrant communities and to Haiti itself.¹¹ In the new language debate with which Laferrière is confronted, Creole serves as an elided third term that appears only in more subtle ways. Indeed, Laferrière's translator from French into English, David Homel, has argued that the original texts are marked by "gaps and uneasiness we sometimes sense" that show that "[Laferrière's] books, written in French,

¹¹ Even within Haiti, the number of publications in Creole is relatively small due to a variety of factors such as the low literacy rate, the cost of books, the limited market, and the institutionalization of French as the language of instruction. In North America, Educa Vision publishes some texts in Creole (creative writing as well as educational materials in such fields as hygiene and domestic violence), and recently the small independent publishing house Mémoire d'encrier, founded in Montreal in 2003 by Haitian-born Rodney Saint-Eloi, has released a few titles in bilingual Creole-French or Creole-English editions.

are translations from the Creole that's in his head" ("Tin-Fluting It" 50).¹² Homel does not give any specific examples of these "gaps," aside from mentioning that, for him, *Dining with the Dictator* bears them most heavily, so it is difficult to know exactly where and how he (and not "we") senses them. He does note that "no one has ever remarked on [the Creoleness of Laferrière's texts] before," in all likelihood because most readers don't "really know what's behind what they are reading," which he claims "proves that Laferrière has learned the second language exceedingly well—but not seamlessly" ("Tin-Fluting It" 50). While Homel celebrates this appearance of Creole in Laferrière's writing and also sympathizes with his condition of writing in a language imposed upon him ("Tin-Fluting It" 50), Homel's account of the situation is problematic and ultimately condescending, suggesting that he, too, might not "really know what's behind" what he is reading, to use his own rather smug formulation.

It is true that, as Homel says, French is not the language of Laferrière's childhood and was "acquired secondarily," but this does not have to mean, as Homel claims, that French remains for Laferrière "a blunt, unfamiliar set of tools" ("Tin-Fluting It" 50). Creole and French have been the joint official languages of Haiti since 1961, but there is certainly a difference in their usage, where Creole remains largely an oral medium of day-to-day conversation and French the institutionalized language of instruction. Thus while Laferrière would have spent the first several years of his life in Creole, his schooling would have been, from the start, more or less in French. Clearly this is an imposition left over from French colonialism, but this kind of indoctrination leads to a rather high level of skill in the imposed language. If, as Laferrière observes, most of his

¹² See Chapter 4 on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o for a discussion of "mental translation" from a native language in one's head to a colonizer's language on the page.

schoolbooks were published in France, with the most notable exceptions being in history, geography, and literature (*J'écris* 30), then his comfort with French *as a written language* would not be much different from that of a French child. Furthermore, despite the fact that school and public libraries had poor collections of books, Laferrière has often mentioned being a voracious reader from a young age, tearing through whatever he could get his hands on. The most important distinction to make here is French as the major vehicle *for the written word* and thus for *written forms of literature*, such that while French might be out of place in daily lived experience, it becomes naturalized as the medium for literary expression, and Laferrière's comfort with it in terms of written creation should not be underestimated.

Certainly Homel acknowledges that Laferrière has learned French "exceedingly well," just not "seamlessly." What seems troubling in this formulation is the fact that it attributes the surfacing of Creole in Laferrière's French as merely accidental and denies the possibility that it could be intentional and strategic, part of the author's performance of the exotic. In the case of Laferrière, this varies from text to text; the level of Creole emergent in the French increases when the story takes place in Haiti rather than Canada or the United States. Thus the context of the story, and the lived experience of the people within it, help to determine the language used to express it. According to Laferrière, *Pays sans chapeau* (1996/*Down Among the Dead Men*, 1997), for example, a novel that speaks of the narrator's return to Haiti after twenty years,

is written in French and Creole at the same time. Creole is there even when the characters express themselves in French. Moreover, one character points out that they have been speaking Creole for a while even though they hadn't stopped speaking French. The fact is that I lose myself in this linguistic muddle. I'm crisscrossed by different languages, different

customs, different histories waging an endless war over who will dominate my mind. (*J'écris* 224-25)

There is, admittedly, in Laferrière's manner of speaking, a lack of control over what language he uses, as if he were at the mercy of the languages "dominat[ing] his mind." This element of subconscious language use can also be found in the way he describes the process of writing the first novel he wrote that takes place in Haiti, *L'odeur du café* (1991/*An Aroma of Coffee*, 1993) a fictionalized account of his childhood. Laferrière relates that, upon reading the original manuscript, his editor "understood all the words, [but] he had trouble sometimes understanding the meaning of certain sentences." When Laferrière reread what he had sent, he "discover[ed] that the syntax was Creole. In a way, it was impossible to write a book recounting my childhood in Petit-Goâve in a language other than Creole" (*J'écris* 224). He eventually "took the manuscript back to establish the text in French" since "the vast majority of his readers only read French" (*J'écris* 224). If this is the case, then in the published text at least, Laferrière had to consider the language choices he was making deliberately, even if he claims the original was reflexive. Giving credibility to this version of events would mean accepting Homel's statement that when Laferrière writes he is actually translating from Creole in his head, at least in the case of his Haitian-situated texts, although again it seems that Homel exaggerates the foreignness of French as a medium of writing for Laferrière. What I ultimately argue is that this process of translation indicates not so much a strict divide between the two languages as a melding of the two, such that, in approaching Laferrière's texts, we are not talking about French but about varieties of French.

For Homel, the Creoleness of Laferrière's writing signals itself through "gaps and uneasiness" in the French. That is, through moments in the text that are "not French." But

what is “French”? In the context of Quebec, it seems strange that Homel should insist on *a French language*, as if there were one standard. If Quebec finds itself, as a minority population, marginalized culturally and linguistically by the rest of Canada, it is marginalized in a different way in relation to France. French is the official language in both places, but the variety spoken in France acquires the status of the standard by which usage in other parts of the globe is measured, and the variety in Quebec becomes classified as non-standard, derivative, a dialect. So, too, does the cultural production of France rank highest in terms of prestige and marketability in relation to other Francophone cultural production, or even compared to most other places in the world. France has a host of big names in the canon of world literature—its Molières, Hugos, Vernes, Baudelaires, and so on—and more Nobel Prize for Literature wins than any other nation, the most recent being J. M. G. Le Clézio in 2008. Few Quebecois writers have any sort of international name recognition.¹³ And so French becomes the language of Diderot, of Camus, of Sartre and not of Tremblay, Roy, or Maillet.

Well-acquainted as he is with the Quebecois literary scene, Laferrière’s translator Homel (himself an Anglophone immigrant from Chicago) is aware of its language politics, both in relation to Anglophone Canada and France as well as within Quebec itself. He references internal Quebecois language debates when he mentions the dialect journal: “remember that variety of *québécois* French that used to have meaning a couple decades ago?” (“Tin-Fluting It” 50). It is unclear if his patronizing tone is directed at journal literature for being a silly, reactionary movement or at readers for treating it as such and thus letting it lose its meaning. But Homel certainly has an awareness of *varieties* of

¹³ Nobel laureate Saul Bellow was born in Quebec to Russian immigrant parents, but left during his childhood and never wrote in French.

French as opposed to a supposed universal standard, and so it is surprising that he doesn't allow Laferrière's French to be one of those non-standard varieties, a possible Haitian French or immigrant French. As Simon has observed, "Many Montrealers came to realize that the official voices of Montreal's historic communities no longer reflected the reality on the ground, as these communities became more diverse and less easy to define according to strict linguistic or ethnic categories" (*Translating Montreal* 7). According to Simon, such a situation comes into existence through a failure in translation:

... as result, not of distance, but of excessive contact and interpenetration. This is a positive form of failure, a breakdown that indicates an evolution toward new forms of expression. Translation is a form of regulation. It allows exchange and intercomprehension, while keeping languages separate. (*Translating Montreal* 9)

While Simon qualifies the phenomenon as "a failure" (since for her translation would require a language x and y to translate between), I argue rather that such bleeding between languages is a very condition of translation, that translation always bears the trace of the source language in the process of translation, and that prolonged translation interactions will inevitably lead to the accumulation of these traces.¹⁴ The contact between Creole and French, then, can be said to have created Laferrière's variety of French, which he has obviously mastered. That is, Laferrière might be perfectly comfortable speaking and writing French as he does, and the "uneasiness" Homel senses there may be his own.

The most unfortunate part of Homel's reflection on the Creoleness of Laferrière's French is the way he throws up his hands at introducing that element into the translation: "How can we communicate this in English? I don't think we can. ... Laferrière's Creoleness is lost in translation" ("Tin-Fluting It" 50). Strange words coming from the

¹⁴ See Lydia Liu's *Translingual Practice* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995) for an example of this in relation to translation between Chinese and other languages.

translator himself. Perhaps the reason is that Homel is more interested in conserving a different translingual relationship in Laferrière's work, that between French and English. Laferrière and Homel have both often shared the anecdote of the former telling the latter that the translation of *Comment faire l'amour...* would be easy because it was already written in English, just with French words. And Homel agrees: "There is a manic, immigrant energy there that is perfectly suitable for the English language (some would say that energy *is* the English language" ("Tin-Fluting It" 50). What Laferrière and Homel are mainly alluding to is the style of the former's writing. Laferrière's goal is actually an "absence of style" in which "the reader forgets the words to see the things. Direct contact with life. No intermediary" (*J'écris* 54). An excerpt from *Comment faire l'amour...* in which Laferrière's alter ego, who is also a writer, composes a portrait of his room on his typewriter illustrates this pared-down style perfectly:

A description of my room at 3670 rue St-Denis (done in cooperation with my old Remington 22).
I write: bed.
I see: dank mattress, dirty sheet, pounded-out pillow, corrugated couch.
I think: sleep (Bouba sleeps twelve hours straight), make love (Miz Sophisticated Lady), daydream in bed (with Miz Literature), write in bed (*Black Cruiser's Paradise*), read in bed (Miller, Cendrars, Bukowski).
(98)

The language is trimmed down to the bare minimum, and yet it speaks volumes about the narrator's life—his material situation, his relationships with others, his hopes and dreams, and his intellectual world. Through this type of style, Laferrière places himself in an American (read: U.S.) tradition of writing, major contributors being Hemingway and then the writers of the Beat Generation. Laferrière admires Hemingway's "ability to express his feelings clearly without trying to explain or analyze them. Not slipping anything into

the text to signify one way or another that you're intelligent: in a word, trusting your emotion" (*J'écris* 181). This in opposition to European, and especially French, writing that he finds verbose: "I've always been intrigued by the very French expression *c'est-à-dire* (that is to say), asking myself why they didn't get directly to the explanation in the first place" (*J'écris* 180).

In aligning himself with a style of writing practiced by authors from the United States, Laferrière again avoids neat categorizations, locating himself more densely in the overlapping context in which he finds himself and defying expectations for postcolonial writers. His stylistic choices make it difficult to define him as (only) a Haitian writer or a Quebecois writer, and in fact Laferrière has long identified himself as an *American* writer, where America signifies not the United States but North America, including the Caribbean. Laferrière has dubbed his first ten-book cycle, which has been divided by critics into "Canadian" and "Haitian" texts depending on the setting, "An American Autobiography." Such a move also seeks to wrest some of the cultural power away from the United States in the Western Hemisphere, where Canada has been living in its cultural—and political—shadow.

Of course, when I write *Une autobiographie américaine*, I'm speaking about the continent and not just the United States. I'm talking about the fact that Haiti is in America, a fact people tend to forget. The Caribbean is a region of America. I detest the word "Antilles," which alludes to France. When I say that I am an American, I do it in order to place myself and to say that I am not an Antillean (*Antillais*)—not a French subject. I belong to this continent that the United States has wanted to keep simply for itself. The idea of a "Great *American* Novel" is not a novel that can only take place in the United States. I think I am a better contender with *An American Autobiography*, which takes place in Petit-Goâve, Port-au-Prince, Montréal, Los Angeles, Manhattan, Miami, and San Juan (the airport) than many U.S. writers. (Coates 915-16, emphases original)

Thus as a Haitian residing in Quebec, Laferrière participates in multiple hierarchical relations that complicate bilateral formulations of identity as well as of postcoloniality. As a small Francophone nation in North America, Quebec remains on the periphery of both the French-speaking world and the American cultural scene. It is buffeted between two of the major imperial cultural powers of the contemporary world: France and the United States. Haiti, too, has French as one of its official languages and is, as Laferrière constantly reminds his readers, part of the Americas, although differing histories mean that the way Haiti experiences its position in relation to France and the United States is quite different from the way Quebec experiences its corresponding position. As a writer born in Haiti and living in Montreal, Laferrière thus figures into these linguistic and cultural hierarchies on multiple levels and in multiple directions.

The complex position of Laferrière—with its overlaid contexts and relationalities between Haiti, Quebec, Anglophone Canada, the United States, and France—serves as a prime case study for rethinking the model of the way world literature circulates. In the Western academy, the traditional model of cultural movement presented a chauvinistic vision of the world in which civilization as we know it was born in Classical Greece and Rome, grew into Western Europe, and has since radiated outward to the rest of the unenlightened world.¹⁵ Postcolonial studies in particular has challenged the unidirectional movement of culture from West to Rest, aiming to give value to cultural production at the periphery of metropolitan centers like Paris, London, and later New York. But countermodels such as these that value the periphery in opposition to the center or reverse the West-to-Rest cultural flow do not go far enough in breaking down the very binary on which West/Rest chauvinism rests.

¹⁵ For an overview of the history of world literature as a field, see the Introduction.

Recently, David Damrosch in his seminal *What is World Literature?* has brought the question of circulation back to the heart of the definition of world literature, and he proposes an alternative model which destabilizes the monolithic poles mentioned above. Damrosch's model is as interested in reception as it is in circulation, and thus he invokes the idea of "refraction" in which texts have no innate integrity but rather are transformed in the reception process depending on who is receiving/perceiving them where, in which context, from which perspective.¹⁶ The circulation of world literature thus corresponds, for Damrosch, to a process of "double refraction" represented by an ellipse "with the source culture and host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone" (283). He goes on to add, however, that "as we begin to look more widely we soon find ourselves amid a multitude of partially overlapping ellipses, all sharing one focus in the host culture but with their second foci distributed ever more widely across space and time" (284). The space of world literature, then, is not so much an ellipse but a network of ellipses, overlaid and lopsided, depending on the web of relations and the power dynamics involved. A change in the ellipse between two cultures is not restricted to that space alone but has ramifications for the entire network of ellipses.

While Damrosch's model goes far in advancing the complexity of world literature circulation, it still presents limitations in its insistence on the source culture focus. Like the multitude of other mobile writers (be they called immigrant, migrant, exile, cosmopolitan, etc), Laferrière raises the question as to which culture should be

¹⁶ The influence of André Lefèvere is evident here. According to Lefèvere, "When the non-professional readers of literature ... say they have 'read' a book, what they mean is that they have a certain image, a certain construct of that book in their heads" (*Translation, Rewriting* 6) which is formed by reading through the rewrites of and around that book. By reading through the rewrites, one privileged form of which is translation, the non-professional reader thus reads a "refraction" of the text and not the text as such ("Mother Courage's Cucumbers" 240-41).

considered the source. Haiti, the culture of his birth? Canada, where he now lives and where the majority of his books are first published? Must we specify Quebec, rather than Canada, since intranational reception in the country as a whole already requires the process of translation? And what of Laferrière's claim of being an *American* writer? What of his more recent novels published simultaneously in Quebec and France? Even if a source culture could be agreed upon as the "origin" of a text, the elliptical model puts too much emphasis on that source culture as the starting point. The result is that any movement to a host culture remains largely bilateral since all the ellipses share the same source culture focus. But the way texts actually circulate shows that movement into a host culture does not come only directly from the "source." A clear example is the fact that translations of texts from "minor" languages are often performed through the intermediary of a "major" language such as English or French. What readers in the final target language get, then, is a refraction of a refraction, a doubly (at the very least) mediated text. And translation is certainly not the only means by which multiple mediations occur simultaneously and in which Damrosch's ellipses could be drawn not only between "source" and host culture but also between host cultures. In the case of Laferrière, his reception in France, for example, is influenced not only by his reception in Quebec—as an immigrant author writing in accordance or against that type—but also by his reception in Haiti—as a Caribbean author writing for or against that type.

By taking up the case of Laferrière and tracing the reception and movement of his texts in and between several interlocking markets, I aim to show that the circulation of world literature requires a less restrictive model that insists less upon a single source and gives more importance to interactions *between* what Damrosch calls host cultures. If we

return to the reigning concept at work in this dissertation, it is here that currency in its etymological root of currents proves particularly useful. Thinking in terms of currents allows us to muddy the waters of circulation, as it were. It lends a certain fluidity to the movement, which has direction but whose tributaries can come from several “sources.” Furthermore, just as when water from two or more sources mingles, it is no longer possible to distinguish which water came from where, so too with texts is it difficult to say which refraction came from where. As regards the circulation of Laferrière’s texts, we might begin by breaking that movement down into its constituent parts: so-called periphery to periphery (Montreal to Haiti); periphery to center (Canada to the United States); center to periphery (France to Montreal); center to center (France to the United States). Not only do Laferrière’s texts not move simply back and forth across the axis between Montreal (where they are originally published) to other markets, but these constituent currents are much muddier than even this schematic would seem. For the current from France to the United States has already been flowing with tributaries from Canada and Haiti. Of all the markets that will be dealt with specifically here, Laferrière has had the least commercial and critical success (outside of the academy) in the United States. Despite his film entitled *Comment conquérir l’Amérique en une nuit* (*How to Conquer America in One Night*), he has yet to break into the U.S. literary scene in any appreciable way aside from attention in academic journals and conferences, and indeed I will argue that his eventual success there will come from the confluence of currents from Francophone and Anglophone Canada, Haiti, and France, demonstrating that the perfect storm of opportunities is necessary to generate cultural currency in certain contexts.

In tracing the currents of movement of Laferrière's texts across time and space, the other two senses of my term *currency*, as outlined in the Introduction, will also play a vital role. For a text to enter appreciably into a literary market—domestic or international—readers must find some *currency* in it, in the sense of relevancy. The reader must feel that the text speaks to them in a way that bears some relation to their own concerns, and those concerns very well may be an interest in other cultures. The reception of Laferrière's texts proves particularly illustrative of the fact that *currency* in terms of relevance changes from market to market (or even within markets, if we consider niche markets). What makes a text current to a reader in France may be quite different from what makes the same text current to a reader in Haiti. In this sense, the globalized market is not as globalized as it might seem. Globalization has become a sort of shorthand for a world in which the same product, cultural or otherwise, spreads across the globe in a sweeping move of uniformism and universalization. But as Sarah Brouillette has argued, books are not Coca Cola:

With a book, too, there is presumably more space for the consumer to construct meaning, and each book product contains a distinct symbolic content. 'Books' are not just books; the word stands in for an assemblage of separate entities, and variety in content leads to complexity of ordering and distribution, and in turn to special technologies for stock control and consumer profiling. Moreover, books cannot move easily across borders due to linguistic and cultural differences that impede easy dissemination. Coke is Coke wherever it goes. ... Notwithstanding all this, isn't Coke itself a complex carrier of different symbolic material, and isn't its meaning as a product something that varies with consumption? (49)

What this means in terms of the circulation of world literature is that a book is not guaranteed a similar reception in different markets because not only is the context not the same, neither is the product, the book, itself. Laferrière has been particularly successful in a variety of markets because of the way that he and the other agents who rewrite his work

(in the Lefevrian sense) have been shrewd about transacting in different forms of currency in different markets.

One of the major principles by which Laferrière has handled his flexible success is the realization that the product in question is not only the book but also its author. In fact Homel lists among the lessons he has learned from working with Laferrière “how a writer can simultaneously use and be used by the media. And I’ve witnessed why writers, if they want anyone to read their books, have to create public personae for themselves” (“Tin-Fluting It” 53-54). Laferrière’s created persona emerges from his fiction as he develops a deliberate slippage between himself and a literary alter ego. Critics and readers generally accept that the narrator in each of Laferrière books is (more or less) the same person, and also based on the author’s own life, but Laferrière is careful to point out that he should not be confused with his narrator, known as Vieux or Vieux Os.¹⁷ Jana Braziel calls this “alter-biography”: “*Alter-* because [his texts] enter into alterity and deconstruct auto-referentiality, while contesting subjectivity and problematizing language as a transparent medium” (“From Port-au-Prince to Montréal to Miami” 242). The reader should thus not assume that the situations, actions, or thoughts of the character(s) necessarily derive directly from Laferrière’s life, even if that character shares key biographical information with the author, such as name, dates, and family members. One of the most notable readers to fall into that trap is Laferrière’s aunt Raymonde, herself both a real person and a character in his work, who actually and fictionally (in *Le goût*

¹⁷ The adult narrator’s friends refer to him as Vieux in conversation, but this is actually just a generic slang form of address like “man.” In the books that deal with his childhood, his grandmother calls him Vieux Os (Old Bones), a nickname referring to the fact that he likes to stay up late into the night. As Bernard Magnier points out, in *Pays sans chapeau* and *Le cri des oiseaux fous* the character himself is referred to as Laferrière rather than Vieux or Vieux Os, which puts a parenthesis around the Autobiography as a whole. The author responds to Magnier’s observation, “It’s true [the narrator] gets his name back at critical moments. In my opinion, a traveler—and every human being is a traveler in one way or another—has two great moments, the moment of departure and that of return” (*J’écris* 19).

des jeunes filles) takes her nephew to task for distorting the truth in his novels, sending him his books once she has read them with her factual corrections in the margins (*J'écris* 44). What she doesn't realize, or won't accept, is that by presenting a narrator who is in many ways both Laferrière and not Laferrière, the author is able to create a mythology around himself and control his image as a writer. Such image management plays into his larger project of promoting his work.

At a certain point in the biographies of Laferrière and Vieux, it becomes more difficult to match up their lives. While Vieux in *Comment faire l'amour...* enjoys the single life, picking up rich Anglophone college girls, drinking cheap wine and writing his first novel in his tiny, decrepit apartment, the author was dividing his time between Montreal and New York City where his new wife and baby daughter lived. Vieux's confirmed bachelorhood, which allows him freedom of movement and also freedom of sexual partners, contributes to a hip persona that then bleeds into that of the author. As Laferrière indicates in his book-length interview with Bernard Magnier *J'écris comme je vis* (2000), "As a writer, I feel closer to a rock star. Rock stars usually don't have any children and are never bald. At least that's the image they want to give of themselves" (58). A much more accurate picture of Laferrière's personal life during this period can be found in the columns he wrote between 1984 and 1986 for the weekly *Haiti-Observateur*, a newspaper based in New York and designed for Haitian expatriates. These columns, later collected and published as *Les années 80 dans ma vieille Ford* (2005, *The 1980s in my Old Ford*), show the author spending time with his family, meeting various other Haitians abroad, visiting the Krome camp for Haitian refugees in Florida, and returning briefly to Haiti to report on the situation there, in significant contrast with Vieux, who

doesn't return to his homeland until 20 years after his 1976 departure in the novel *Pays sans chapeau* (1996, *Down among the Dead Men* 1997). This version of Laferrière/Vieux's life, however, isn't nearly as sexy as the other one, and Laferrière is a man who knows that sex sells, just as it does in the entertainment industry. Indeed, Laferrière is not afraid to include literature within that very industry. As Ursula Mathis-Moser has argued, for Laferrière, the artist must come to accept that "the world of artistic creation is governed simultaneously by business and show business, the latter being only a variant of the former" (75).

If other postcolonial exotic figures experience or at least present a certain unease with their necessary cooperation with the market, however subversive the intent of that cooperation, Laferrière represents an interesting case in that his relationship with the market is direct and unashamed. Laferrière wants you to read his books; he also wants you to *buy* his books. He's not embarrassed to bring up the material, that impolite question of money, although money isn't just about materialistic gain. The outspoken Laferrière wants to be able to say whatever he pleases. In Haiti, the dictatorship blocked that right; in Quebec he finds that political correctness limits freedom of speech (Bordeleau 9). For him, there's a simple solution to censorship, self- or otherwise, as he declares in an interview, "The only way to be truly free is to be famous and rich" (Bordeleau 9). Certainly there is more at work here than money and fame alone; a variety of power structures to which Laferrière is no stranger enter into the equation: race, sex, politics, and so on. But the author is to be commended for his openness not just in connecting money and fame with those power structures—easy enough to do and maintain the moral high ground—but in admitting his own desire to accede to a position

of discursive power through the avenues of money and fame. If you can live off your writing, you have the leisure to write. If your writing has made you famous, people will take a greater interest in what you have to say. Money and fame are a means to a more liberal platform from which to articulate your point of view, and perhaps an oppositional point of view. Yet how do you attain money and fame? By giving the public a product it wants to buy, and there's the rub, as Huggan has noted with his study of the postcolonial exotic.

But as Brouillette has argued in her critique of Huggan, the relationship between postcolonial authors and their readers is not as fraught or antagonistic as Huggan makes out. According to Brouillette, Huggan creates an unsophisticated “global market reader” serving as a foil for a different class of readers—Huggan, of course, included—who are “educated, elite, distinguished consumers” (19). The global market reader is thus a straw man for a kind of self-congratulatory understanding of postcolonial writing, although the global market reader also functions as a straw man for Brouillette's critique of Huggan, since she, not he, invented the term. While Brouillette misrepresents to some degree Huggan's argument, there is still value in her own case for a less homogeneous characterization of the global market reader, allowing for a variety of astute reader responses:

... strategic exoticism is not something a writer deploys to teach a reader about the errors in her conceptions about other cultures, much though it depends upon a construction of a figure in need of such instruction. Instead, it indicates a set of textual strategies that communicates at all because the author and the *actual* reader likely share assumptions about the way culture operates, and concur in their desire to exempt themselves from certain undesirable practices. (43)

Readers of certain types of postcolonial writing, then, are not looking necessarily for exoticism but for an ironic distance from exoticism. In the case of Laferrière, we can say that his readers are in on the joke. When Laferrière protests about being pigeonholed as a Caribbean writer, a black writer, an immigrant writer, and so on, the readers with whom these protests have currency—Brouillette’s “actual readers”—will not be the ones being chastised. Instead, those readers and Laferrière are complicit in a critique of another type of reader, imagined or not. As Brouillette writes in regards to Nobel Prize-winning Saint Lucian writer Derek Walcott, his “conflicted hesitation about his relationship to his material *is* in many cases his material” (43). This is abundantly clear for Laferrière also in books such as *Why Must a Black Writer Write about Sex?*, in which he laments and exploits the expectations for black authors, or in *I am a Japanese Writer*, in which he hilariously resists all attempts to label him by declaring himself a Japanese writer. Readers would hardly take pleasure in these books—wouldn’t laugh—if they felt they were the ones being made to look foolish for 150 pages.

Laferrière’s particular brand of strategic exoticism, then, involves casting off labels at the same time as he plays up to them, however ironically. What increases the flexibility and reach of this type of Laferrièrean currency is the number of labels he is willing to *take on*—both in the sense of to assume and to contest: “A single label isn’t good, but lots of labels, that’s no problem” (Morency 22). By dealing with/in several labels, he avoids too strict a categorization and also allows his work to circulate in accordance with various types of cultural currency. Different markets will favor different types of currency: Quebecois readers might be more particularly interested in what he makes of the immigrant label, Haitian readers of the Caribbean label, etc. In this sense,

the idea of cultural capital requires refinement, because cultural capital acquired and accumulated in one place does not necessarily transfer to another. Ezra Pound's monetary metaphor of writerly name recognition can be of use here:

If Mr. Rockefeller draws a cheque for a million dollars it is good. If I draw one for a million it is a joke, a hoax, it has no value ... The same applies with cheques against knowledge ... You do not accept a stranger's cheques without reference. In writing, a man's 'name' is his reference. He has, after a time, credit. (cited in Casanova 16).

Pound's formulation might be reworked to describe the way writing travels between markets. Even if Mr. Rockefeller can draw a good check for a million dollars in the United States, that doesn't mean he can write a check for a million dollars and use it in Japan because dollars are not the currency of Japan. The capital does not necessarily transfer, or rather, it needs to be transferred into another type of currency.

Laferrière's work has been quite successfully transferred into a variety of currencies in a variety of markets, thanks to his own shrewd writing and marketing strategies and those of his translator, his editors, and other rewriters. Laferrière, like all writers, I argue, does not so much accumulate cultural capital as capitalize on opportunities. To capitalize on opportunities means to be capitalist and opportunistic, but I suggest here that these words need not be taken in their negative aspect. Certainly there is a negative aspect to Laferrière's capitalist opportunism; it can be self-serving or come at the expense of others, as it does with regards to white women in his fiction, as we will see later. His comfort with the material issues of writing also mean that he will unself-consciously accept material advantage from his work. Invite him to a conference on Caribbean writing, and he will tell you that he is not a Caribbean writer, but he will allow you to pay for his trip to your conference where he will tell your audience that he is not a

Caribbean writer. Laferrière's capitalist opportunism thus sometimes teeters on ethical boundaries, but capitalizing on opportunities does not necessarily imply doing so. In fact, I argue, it is the very condition of finding a place in the market. Write a book that has no currency, and no one will read it. Which is not to say that writing needs to pander to a sanitized global market. Subversion also has currency, and certain opportunities will enable writers to explore more deeply the subversive potential of literature. Laferrière's opportunism has, however, been far from an instantaneous process. While his first novel became an overnight success in Quebec, his entrance into other markets, such as Haiti and France, took considerably more time, and his reception in the U.S. market has until now been rather piecemeal and sometimes even hostile. In what follows, I trace the circulation of Laferrière's texts over space and time to bring to light the different sorts of opportunities his work capitalizes on and the different types of currency that can be granted to the same texts in different contexts.

French Canada

As an examination of the popularity of *Comment faire l'amour...* and its author shows, texts do not succeed in the market merely based on something called "merit." Certainly in the case of *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, the title accounts for a good deal of the attention the book received upon its release. As Laferrière comments in *Why Must a Black Writer Write About Sex?*:

The title of my first novel made me famous. People who never read the book, especially those who had no intention of reading it, can quote you the title. It took me five minutes to come up with it. Three years to write the book. If only I'd known ... Forget about those hundreds of scribbled pages; all I needed were ten little words: How to Make Love to a Negro without Getting Tired. (17, ellipsis original)

The title sets the tone for an uninhibited, humorous look at interracial sexual relationships, a subject not without a risqué sort of appeal, especially 25 years ago when such couples were relatively less common. Flirting thus as it does with taboo, the title draws in the potential reader to have a closer look and provokes, if not always discussion, at least a visceral reaction. Lending itself to hot-topic type conversation, the book led to Laferrière's almost immediate appearance on the public affairs program *Noir sur Blanc* hosted by Denise Bombardier on Radio-Canada television—a case of reality imitating fiction. In *Comment faire l'amour...*, Vieux, dreaming of the literary fame his own in-progress novel *Black Cruiser's Paradise*, will afford him, imagines just such an interview taking place. The concept of this neat *mise en abîme* probably helped Laferrière land the interview, as well as the fact that discussing the book on the program places Bombardier as a cultural arbiter and serves as self-validation and self-endorsement for the television host. Endorsement was, of course, exactly what Laferrière was also looking for from the experience:

The book came out on a Friday, and that Saturday I had an interview with Denise Bombardier. It was the first time in my life that I was on TV. I had seven minutes to try everything. I'd sworn to myself that I'd slap Denise Bombardier in the face if it went badly, not because I'd have anything against her, just to be sure to make the news the next day. ... Bombardier started the interview almost like I'd shown her doing in [*Comment faire l'amour...*]. (*J'écris* 162)

His joke about slapping Bombardier to get press fits into his larger project of deliberate self-promotion. *Comment faire l'amour...* did not appear on bookshelves and spontaneously jump off them the next day. Before the book's release, Laferrière himself took the initiative of having a friend print posters with a photo of him and then of putting them up around the city. The author had carefully reflected upon the image he wanted to present of himself in the photo: barefoot and typing on his typewriter on a park bench

with a bottle of beer in a brown paper bag next to him. Some friends accused him of playing up to stereotypes of black people, but he claims he aimed rather to place himself within the tradition of Beat writing and to look “like a writer at work” (*J’écris* 160-2). Even as a debut writer, Laferrière clearly understood that getting your book read is as much about the packaging of the book and its author as what’s between its covers. Behind his carefree attitude he hid a meticulous attention to his image as a writer and sought out ways to cultivate that image outside the text.

The Bombardier interview was far short of being Laferrière’s last appearance on television. Soon after, it helped him land the morning weatherman job that saw him forecasting in the nude. That naked report was only one of the ways in which Laferrière put his own spin on his segment, as he also left the studio to do popular man-on-the-street bits, a move which turned him into a veritable television personality and led to numerous other TV appearances. In the words of fellow Haitian writer Louis-Philippe Dalembert:

There’s no doubt about it: he blows up the small screen. From the beginning, he demonstrated such an ease that I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that the would-be professional put himself through simulated interviews in preparation for confronting that inhibitory monster [television]. Time, experience, and talent did the rest. (7)

Unquestionably, then, Laferrière’s on-camera charm played a large part in attracting a readership, and it also doesn’t hurt that his early novels match the provocative yet jovial image presented on television. Aside from touching on racy, taboo subject matter, Laferrière’s books are ostensibly easy reads: short novels with short paragraphs and short sentences, as already mentioned, in the style of Hemingway and Beat writers. But the ideas expressed behind Laferrière’s rather flip representation are considerably weighty: race, identity politics, dictatorship, exile, to name a few. In this way, Laferrière manages

to walk the fine line between “serious” and “commercial” fiction in Canada, thus gaining a wide readership while maintaining his credibility.

Laferrière’s studied self-promotion thus proved quite effective in conquering the market in Francophone Canada. He gives the impression of being a celebrity in Montreal, where, he claims, he can’t walk down the street without someone asking him when his next book will be coming out (*J’écris* 59). Even if we take this as an exaggeration designed to contribute to the image he fosters of himself as a rock star writer, we can still acknowledge that Laferrière has a notoriety in Montreal unlike that of most other writers. What makes him personally so recognizable, however, appears to derive not so much from his novels as from his television appearances. Therefore, the way in which Laferrière is able to capitalize on his media presence in order to gain readers as well as bargaining power with publishing houses (Dalembert 8) is limited geographically by the dissemination of that media. That is, his contributions to Quebecois television, radio, and print media only reach audiences in Quebec, a relatively small market, in comparison to both the otherwise mostly Anglophone country of Canada as well as of the wider Francophone world.

Although his public persona has played a key role in Laferrière’s popularity in Quebec, it by no means accounts for all of it. Other factors based in the texts themselves have contributed to his status as a writer there, and particularly to his being identified as an important “Quebecois” writer. Laferrière’s novels, especially *Comment faire l’amour...*, appealed to Francophone Canadian readers by matching certain literary trends and attitudes. As already mentioned, Laferrière’s first novel chronicles the lifestyle of Vieux and Bouba, two black immigrants who share a tiny, filthy apartment, philosophize

over cheap wine, and pick up girls. Central to the book is what Laferrière describes as the “explosive” sexual encounter between the black male and the white female, which becomes not only a site for pleasure but also for power struggle. In Laferrière’s hierarchy of race and sex, the white man stands alone at the top, followed by the white woman, and next the black man. However, by sleeping with the white woman, by in a sense taking what “belongs” to the white man, the black man can usurp some of his authority (as well as that of the white woman). In order to seduce their partners Vieux and his friends mobilize the stereotypes that attribute black men with exceptional sexual prowess, an act that the white women envisioned by Laferrière accept all too credulously. It is important to note that the young women who comprise Vieux’s conquests belong to Montreal’s exclusive minority Anglophone population, privileged both economically and socioculturally. Despite their advantaged backgrounds and elite education, the women easily fall dupe to the immigrant black men’s ruse, and so the playful humor of the text actually often comes at the expense of Vieux’s conquests. The fact that the women taken in by the black men’s game come from the Anglophone Westmount neighborhood creates an appeal for the Francophone Canadian reader. As Pascale de Souza and André Lamontagne (63; 34), among others, have noted, Francophone Quebecois resentful of the Anglophone minority derive gratification from the latter being made to look foolish.

The novel, then, functions to form an alliance between a Francophone Canadian readership and Laferrière, despite his being an outsider in Montreal as a black Haitian immigrant. By exacting a sort of postcolonial sexual revenge on the Westmount girls, Vieux/Laferrière becomes “one of us.” A further bond between Montrealers and *Comment faire l’amour...* arises from the topographical specificity of the book. Laferrière

frequently mentions actual locations in the city: parks, bookstores, bars, a post office, the cross at the top of the hill in Westmount, as well as the exact address of Vieux's apartment on the Rue Saint Denis. The reader familiar with Montreal thus also experiences the pleasure of recognition, of being in-the-know, of essentially being an insider in Laferrière's novelistic world. The Westmount girls and the Montreal sites combine, then, to create mutual sentiments of inclusion between author and reader, bringing the author into the reader's community, and vice versa.

Laferrière's insiderness is far from being complete, however. He, like his protagonist, remains subject to racial and cultural discrimination as a black immigrant from a developing country. It is precisely the unknown or misunderstood aspects of his background that allow Vieux to manipulate the sexual desires of the Canadian women. In *Éroshima*, Vieux describes being the token black person at a chic party, of being an exotic curiosity which lends the event a certain caché that he in turn cashes in on: "From now on, you won't be able to have a party without a Negro. No scene is complete without one. His presence permits all fantasies. Keiko said that to one of her girlfriends over the phone ...: 'We'll have a Negro'" (45). His skin color also leads him to be singled out in much more overtly racist ways, such as when the police stop and search him because they are looking for a black male suspect (*Drifting Year* 45). Laferrière's early "American" novels—those that take place mostly in Canada and/or the United States, namely *Comment faire l'amour...* (1986), *Éroshima* (1987), *Cette grenade...* (1993), and *Chronique de la dérive douce* (1994)—taken together depict the experiences of a Third World immigrant writing himself into the culture of his adoptive country in the First World. Laferrière is in a sense playing at two kinds of notoriety—the strategic exotic

tokenism of the black immigrant and the televised celebrity of the rock star writer, and the two exist in a precarious feedback loop. He came to fame through his depictions of the life of a poor exile, but once that fame has been achieved, he is no longer a poor exile. The mythology that Laferrière cultivates in his fiction thus aptly enables him to keep that poor exile part of him alive. In one of his most recent novels, *I'm a Japanese Writer*, for example, Vieux the writer can still be found in a shabby apartment in an immigrant neighborhood, barely able to pay the rent. Brazil's term of "alter-biography" proves particularly salient because Laferrière's fiction allows him to construct alternate, parallel life stories in which he can keep the currency of strategic exoticism in circulation as he reaps its financial and cultural benefits.

Vieux's alternate life does not remain fixed, however, to the point where Laferrière rehearses the exact same postcolonial exotic character *ad nauseum*. By the time of *Cette grenade...*, Vieux's success as an author has eliminated some of the material difficulties of his condition, but it poses new problems as to preconceived notions about what a black, immigrant male can and should write about. Just as Laferrière's insiderness—his local television celebrity, his inclusion of specific Montreal topography, and his protagonist's alliance with Francophone Canadians against the Anglophone Quebecois minority—served to ingratiate him to a French Canadian readership, so did his/his narrator's outsidership as an immigrant from Haiti help to generate interest in his work, especially on the scholarly level. The 1990s saw a turn in the North American academy toward diversity and multiculturalism in which intellectuals engaged more frequently not only with more and more diverse cultures but also with diversity within their own cultures. Such investigations involved a rethinking of national

identity, a re-positing of questions such as “What does it mean to be Quebecois?” or “Who qualifies as Canadian?” Vieux’s fictional integration into Quebec thus fits neatly into one of the hot scholarly topics of the time, and Laferrière’s work began to generate increased attention from the academy, especially in journals published in and about Canada.¹⁸

Laferrière deems the attraction of scholars to his work self-centered, as an attempt to get a fresh view of their society from an outsider:

People thought I was talking about them (“How does he see us?”), but I was only talking about myself. Since in their eyes I was a black writer or a Haitian writer, they thought my gaze could only be turned toward the surroundings (things, people), when it was instead directed toward the interior. (*Je suis fatigué* 101-102)

He misses the complexity of the situation here, however. Those concerned with questions of Quebecois identity valued not only his gaze looking at them, but also his gaze looking inside to himself—because that gaze also had repercussions for them. In his personal identity struggle brought on by his immigrant condition, Laferrière is an outsider in the process of becoming, at least partially, an insider. In such a case where one of “them” becomes one of “us,” the identity of “us” must also be reformulated. De Souza also finds that Vieux’s identity quest in which he tries to find his place in Quebecois society resonates with readers there because they extrapolate it to their own quest for identity as a French-speaking minority in the Canadian nation as a whole. Strictly along the Francophone/Anglophone division in Canada, the “outsider” immigrant Laferrière/Vieux

¹⁸ For example: Naudin, Anne, “Dany Laferrière: Être noir à Montréal,” *Etudes Canadiennes/Canadian Studies: Revue Interdisciplinaire des Etudes Canadiennes en France* 21.38 (June 1995): 47-55; Lamontagne, André, “On ne naît pas Nègre, on le devient”: La Représentation de l’autre dans *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer de Dany Laferrière*,” *Québec Studies* 23 (Spring 1997): 29-42; Thérien, Michel, “Conjonctions et disjonctions dans *Chronique de la dérive douce* de Dany Laferrière ou poésie de la condition immigrante,” in *Cultural Identities in Canadian Literature/Identités culturelles dans la littérature canadienne*, Bénédicte Mauguière, (ed.), NY: Peter Lang, 1998, 173-82 ; L’Hérault, Pierre, “Le Je incertain: Fragmentations et dédoublements,” *Voix et Images: Littérature Québécoise* 23.3 (Spring 1998) : 501-14.

counts as an “insider” in Quebec in opposition to the rest of the country. What makes the author’s work particularly stimulating, therefore, is the way it puts into evidence the fluid boundaries of the insider-outsider dichotomy and the way that straddling those boundaries can help to create a niche in the market.

Anglophone Canada

If Laferrière’s fiction helped to redefine Quebecois identity by exploring what it means to be an immigrant minority in Montreal, then it also functioned to redefine Canadian identity, as the nation as a whole took into account the transformed minority Quebecois identity within its midst. By discussing Laferrière’s significance to multiculturalism in Quebecois fiction, David Homel, in his introduction to his translation, also justifies the importance and relevance of bringing the text over into English: “And without burdening this new writer with the ‘ethnic’ tag, part of the positive response to Laferrière came from the new image he was projecting of an immigrant Quebec. Quebec fiction has always worked with the problems of identity; readers seemed ready to accept Laferrière’s immigrant version of that age-old struggle” (Introduction 10). Homel, an Anglophone transplant to Montreal who had grown up in Chicago and the son of Russian Jewish immigrants himself, played a key role in the book’s movement into Anglophone Canada. The translation of *Comment faire l’amour...*, popular as it was, should not be considered an inevitability. When Homel embarked on the translation of *Comment faire l’amour...*, he already had numerous book-length translations to his name of texts by various Quebecois authors, which would have given him more say in what projects he took on and lent his opinions about Quebecois literature more weight. It was Homel who approached Laferrière to initiate the process of the translation (Introduction 10), and thus

it is the former's expectations about what makes good fiction, both in Quebec and in Anglophone Canada, that led to the circulation of the book in English at that moment. He makes his tastes clear in his introduction when he gives his interpretation of the state of Quebecois writing:

There is another reason for Laferrière's success that has to do with the Quebec writing scene. His book makes an absolute contrast to virtually everything that has been written in Quebec over the last little while. To read this *Nègre*, after suffering through the novels of Jansenist isolation and pent-up madness, the stock in trade of so many Quebec novelists, is more than a breath of fresh air—it's a gale-force wind. Recent Quebec fiction has been so completely fastened to its navel, so lost in grim retrospection, that we can only hope it will never be the same after Laferrière's madcap characters and their excessive energy. (Introduction 10)

Since Homel sees the fresh immigrant perspective as one of the main types of currency in Laferrière's work, this is what he attempts to emphasize in his English translation. Homel draws on his personal immigrant linguistic heritage, "translat[ing Laferrière's] Creole-cadenced French into his own native Chicago tongue, the standard American street diction of the sixties—i.e. into that language which, he maintains, is 'half-Black and half-Jewish'" (Diamond 5). This is one of the reasons Simon finds the pairing of Homel and Laferrière "a fruitful association between writers of similar sensibilities and convictions" (*Culture in Transit* 10). But whereas Homel's "native Chicago tongue" may provide Canadian readers with a sense of strategic immigrant exoticism, it will not have the same effect in the United States, where that type of language would be anything but exotic. Actually, American readers may wonder why this new immigrant has adopted street slang more than two decades old, and wonder if that's part of the joke. For example, Homel translates the title "*Paradis du drageur Nègre*," the novel with the novel that Vieux is writing, as *Black Cruiser's Paradise*. The word

“cruising” will only feel more dated over time in the American context, or shift connotation, as it has, to be mainly associated with the gay male community. Thus something that functions as a sort of strategic exoticism in one context could backfire and come across as unintentionally comical or out of place in another.

Whereas in Laferrière’s fiction set in Montreal, Homel plays up the aspects dealing with the immigrant condition in Canada, in translating Laferrière’s novel set in Haiti, he puts other types of currency into circulation. Homel notes in an essay titled “Tin-Fluting It” that he changed the title of *Le goût des jeunes filles* in English to *Dining with the Dictator*, not because of problems of linguistic correspondence but because of a “reception problem” (“Tin-Fluting It” 48).¹⁹ That problem is that Anglophone Canadian readers, because of the sex and humor, do not find Laferrière’s work political, and as at least one reviewer believed, “any book by a Haitian writer set in Haiti had an obligation to be political” (“Tin-Fluting It” 47). Rather than quibble with that obligation, Homel instead aims to prove that Laferrière’s work is, in fact, political. In *Dining with the Dictator*, for example, the sex comes in the context of “the attempts of a half-dozen young women to survive the Duvalier dictatorship by using their wiles and their bodies” (“Tin-Fluting It” 48). Even in novels, such as *An Aroma of Coffee*, which the reviewer in question was criticizing and which do not make direct reference to the dictatorship, Homel is right to emphasize the underlying political atmosphere of the novel and argues that “[s]ilence, absence are too subtle a strategy” for some readers (“Tin-Fluting It” 48). Homel then proceeds to justify his translation choices that highlight the political in Laferrière’s work, and he also chides readers “willing to read Milan Kundera as a serious

¹⁹ The term “tin-fluting,” as Homel explains, means the radical change of a title in translation and “is named after Gabrielle Roy’s *Bonheur d’occasion*, which was wisely not translated as ‘Used Happiness,’ but became *The Tin Flute*” (47).

political novelist despite all his joking and sexual play, but the same courtesy doesn't extend to Laferrière. Could this have something to do with the colour of his skin?" ("Tin-Fluting It" 48). Homel's stress on the political—despite the sex and fun—is particularly interesting as a strategy for cultivating a certain type of currency for Laferrière in light of Kundera's own negative attitude toward being considered a political writer, as we will see in the following chapter.

Homel's translation of Laferrière's debut novel marked the start of a lasting collaboration in which the former produced the English version of the latter's six subsequent texts,²⁰ nearly keeping pace with Laferrière's rate of a book a year from 1991 to 1994. Indeed, on two occasions, Homel's translation appeared the same year as the French version. In the meantime, Homel had become one of the premier translators from Francophone Canadian literature into English, as well as a novelist himself. He also edited a collection of essays with Simon: *Mapping Literature: The Art and Politics of Translation* (1988). With his formidable output—both in terms of volume and respectability—as translator, novelist, and commentator, Homel has attained a rather powerful voice in the Canadian literary and cultural community, which makes him a rather telling illustration of the way that community functions. As can be seen from Homel's catalogue of publications, there is a high rate of exchange between Anglophone and Francophone Canadian literature, an exchange backed by government grants for intranational translation. The Canada Council for the Arts, which administers the grants, requires that the publisher, author, and translator all be Canadian. Canadian translator

²⁰ Namely: *Éroshima* (1987)/*Eroshima* (1991), *L'odeur du café* (1991)/*An Aroma of Coffee* (1993), *Le goût des jeunes filles* (1992)/*Dining with the Dictator* (1992), *Cette grenade dans la main...?* (1993)/*Why Must a Black Writer...?* (1993), *Chronique de la dérive douce* (1994)/*A Drifting Year* (1997), *Pays sans chapeau* (1996)/*Down Among the Dead Men* (1997).

Wayne Grady even mentions a case of not being able to get funding from the Canada Council for translations of Quebecois fiction for *The Penguin Book of Modern Canadian Short Stories* he was editing in 1981 because Penguin is not “wholly Canadian-owned” (20). Homel’s translations of Laferrière were thus issued first by Coach House Press out of Toronto (the first five novels), and more recently Vancouver-based Douglas & McIntyre.

The favoring of independent, Canadian presses certainly poses advantages: it guarantees that the government sponsorship and subsequent profit stay within the country, thus supporting local cultural development over international corporation-style publication. But it also means that distribution is limited and that Canadian intranational literary exchange tends to remain just that—turned in upon itself with little export to other literary markets. Coach House, for example, is a small boutique press that originally published poetry and experimental prose. With little financial stability (it actually went bankrupt in 1996 before restarting in 1997), it has little pull in international distribution, and in fact none of Laferrière’s translated titles were picked up for republication in the United States.²¹ By giving preferentiality to works written by Canadians, the Arts grants also make it more difficult for texts from nations, especially those with lesser-spoken languages, to enter the Canadian system. Grady notes that most translations from languages other than French come from the United States or Great Britain (26).²² Since translations in the Anglo-American book market rarely turn a large profit, those that are

²¹ For a history of Coach House’s translation series, see former editor Frank Davey’s speech at the 1995 conference of the Association for Canadian and Quebec Literatures in Montreal: <http://publish.uwo.ca/~fdavey/c/chpque.htm>.

²² For a statistical comparison of the number, language, and genre of translations published in Canada and the United States, see: Geneviève Parent. “Deux visages de la traduction en Amérique du Nord: le Canada et les États-Unis.” *Traduction et enjeux identitaires dans le contexte des Amériques*. Ed. Louis Jolicoeur. Culture française d’Amérique. Lévis, Quebec: Laval UP, 2007. 15-35.

already paid for by the CCA subsidies become more attractive in terms of finances for publishers. Thus while the Canadian government's support for translation is laudable, it also creates a feedback loop between the relatively small markets of Francophone and Anglophone Canada, impeding movement out to other literary markets, as well as movement in from other minor-language markets.

Haiti

Laferrière's early success in his new home of Canada did little to create a warm reception for his work in Haiti. In many instances, success in a Western nation can confer Third World writers with credibility in their native countries. French-speaking Canada, though, is neither a very large nor a very prestigious literary market. It, like the Francophone Caribbean, lies on the periphery of the French language literary scene, which revolves around Paris. Thus the cultural capital accorded to Laferrière's texts by Montreal has less currency in the French Antilles. Indeed, his success in Canada, rather than a boon to his reputation in Haiti, was perceived rather negatively by many of his fellow writers there, who considered him a sellout, particularly for the way he courted the popular media. Lyonel Trouillot, who remained in Haiti throughout and after the Duvalier dictatorships, basically accused Laferrière—although not by name—of whoring himself to pop culture and of not taking the profession of writer seriously enough when he wrote, "I know some rather proud [writers] who read only their reviews and work eight hours a day to keep up the pace: their best work consists in posing with their chests puffed out for a pornographic periodical" (quoted in Dalembert 8). Laferrière had, in fact, appeared nude in *Lui* [*Him*] magazine, a French counterpart to *Playboy*, which, in addition to photos of women in various states of undress, also published articles on cultural topics

and current events. While this may have contributed to his rock star writer image in Montreal, it made quite a different impression on readers in Haiti, where, because of economic, social, and political conditions, the role of the writer takes on entirely different dimensions.

In a country where the rate of illiteracy is about 50% of a population of almost 10 million with little to no disposable income (to say the least), success for writers can hardly be measured in massive book sales. With the possibility of a best-seller virtually eliminated, the potential roles for a writer in Haiti tend toward other formulations. As Louis-Philippe Dalembert, a writer himself, notes, “Literary activity rather lends the [the writer] a stature that serves as a launch pad to land a job in civil service, diplomacy, or politics” (8). Furthermore, with recurrent government instability in Haiti since the revolution which founded it, literature there has understandably often taken a political bent. *Littérature engagée* has a long history in Haiti, and many of the key figures in modern writing—such as Jacques Roumain, Jacques Stephen Alexis, and René Depestre—were committed communists. Indeed Alexis, whose direct political activism led to his exile from Haiti under more than one of its tyrants—became a martyr to his cause when he was captured during an attempt to return secretly to Haiti, tortured, and executed in 1961. When *Comment faire l’amour...* appeared on shelves in 1985, the Duvalier dynasty that had sentenced Alexis to death and precipitated Laferrière’s own exile was still in power. Thus the critique of Haitian writers like Trouillot—especially those who had stayed in Haiti—of Laferrière’s brazen self-marketing is linked to their understanding of the role of the writer as an activist spokesperson for the people. Literature, for them, ought to function as a selfless act designed to effect social change,

and thus, in Laferrière's words, they "balked even at admitting that I might be a writer. For them, I was simply a guy writing for nothing but money" (Coates interview 920). Having produced a sly, ironic book that makes no mention of Haiti, he garnered a reputation there, especially among literary circles, as having sold out and turned his back on his native country.

Unsurprisingly, Laferrière's own version of his motives conflicts sharply with that of his critics, and more importantly, is much more complex and ambivalent than they give him credit for. In an imaginary interview with himself, for example, (which in itself might variously be construed as evidence of his constant self-reflection or constant self-obsession, or both) "Laferrière" tells "Dany" that he "didn't dare write the word *Haiti* in [his] first novel ... [because he] didn't feel worthy" out of a sense of guilt for having left when others continued to suffer there (*Je suis fatigué* 47, emphasis original). But he further contends, here as well as elsewhere in texts and interviews, that not dealing with the Duvalier dictatorship in his work does actually serve as a form of resistance to it. According to Laferrière, totalitarian regimes like those of Papa and Baby Doc aim to infiltrate all aspects of their subjects' lives. In addition to physical and legal constraints, they also exert a sort of mind control in that they become a constant mental preoccupation. This is not brainwashing: the Duvaliers were not foolish enough to think that everyone would accept their ideology. But if competing ideologies arise in opposition to the totalitarian one, then in thinking how to reform the dictatorship, the people are inevitably still thinking about the dictatorship. Laferrière's journalistic texts from Haiti in the the mid-1970s as well as his first novel thus buck the authority of the

regime by carving out a space untouched by it. According to his logic, the very refusal to write about politics becomes a political act.

The fact that Laferrière's choice not to write about Haiti functions politically does not mean he wishes to align himself with the project of other Haitian writers. Instead, his turn away from Haiti in *Comment faire l'amour...* and his other early "American" novels is also a turn away from what he considers a stagnant and overly nostalgic Haitian style:

My intention was to get away from the beaten path of our literature. What society expects gives me a pain in the ass. Pious sentiments (on race, peasants, political victims, social prejudices) don't interest me, at least, they interest me less than the manner in which you deal with them. They left me with a syrupy taste in my mouth. ... I was not interested in imitating other Caribbean writers I knew who kept writing about the country they came from after living thirty years in New York, Paris, Berlin or Montréal. I wanted to give an account of the life I was leading at the moment, not of the past. At that time, the past was too recent to interest me. For me, the past was the dictatorship. (Coates interview 911)

As already discussed, Laferrière's decision here proved quite successful in terms of his reception in French-speaking Canada, but the work it produced did not really resonate with Haitian readers at the time. This comes as no surprise, since they never seem to have been intended as Laferrière's primary audience for his early texts. In *Comment faire l'amour...* as in *Éroshima*, the Haitianness of the narrator is played down or even absent, so that Vieux functions as The Black Third-World Immigrant, and not a Haitian immigrant. Vieux deliberately obfuscates his origins, and when a stranger asks him to point to his country on a map, he lets his finger fall on the Ivory Coast, the first country to catch his eye (91). Since most of Vieux's black immigrant friends are African and Vieux himself quotes freely from the Qur'an, the textual evidence actually points to him immigrating from Africa. The kind of currency Laferrière aims to generate, then, is that

of the minority black subject in the context of Quebec and not of the Haitian working through his political exile.

Although Laferrière's books were known in Haiti from the beginning, it wasn't until the publication of his third, *L'odeur du café* with its change in setting to Haiti, that their reception truly took a positive turn with both critical and popular audiences. The text garnered the Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe, which implies its recognition by the judges as a Caribbean novel rather than a Quebecois one. Later, *L'odeur du café* began to be taught in Haitian primary schools and was occasionally selected as the text for the dictation section of the national primary school exams, largely due to pressure from the public (*J'écris* 173), thus institutionalizing the novel as an important text in the Haitian education system. The subject and setting of the book clearly relate to the response it generated in Laferrière's native country. As the author has mentioned in various places, including the book's conclusion, *L'odeur du café* grew out of a single remembered image, that of a young boy lying on the porch at the feet of his grandmother. This snapshot incited Laferrière to write the book, to "relive his childhood" and "see [his] grandmother again" (*J'écris* 194). The reader spends an idyllic summer with young Vieux Os in the quiet coastal town of Petit-Goâve steeped in the grandmother's homegrown wisdom and the traditional culture of vodou and storytelling. This text is also where the Creoleness that Homel senses in Laferrière's writing emerges. For example, Laferrière plays with oral Creole stylistic forms as opposed to American Beat style when he includes several versions of the same apocryphal and fantastic stories told by different residents of Petit-Goâve (46-57, 122-126).

The project is a deeply nostalgic one, then, written by a man who had already passed 15 years out of the land of his birth, but it is also a nostalgia in which the non-exiled Haitian reader can participate as well. The book clearly contradicts Laferrière's earlier policy, though, of writing only about the present. Ironically, his alter ego Vieux still echoes these previous sentiments in *Cette grenade...*, the book published just after *L'odeur du café*, when he responds to an editor who asks him to write about the Caribbean with: "The same old garbage! People are supposed to write about where they come from! I write about what's going on around me, here and now, where I live" (13). But elsewhere Laferrière gives the impression that he didn't write about Haiti early in his career not because he didn't want to but because he couldn't: "It was only later that I *was able* to deal with my own past (childhood and adolescence)" (Coates interview 911, emphasis added). It is interesting to note that he began dealing with Haiti in his fiction at the farthest point back in time in his alter ego's life and that *L'odeur du café* is his Haitian novel that has the least to do with the dictatorship, as if Laferrière were working up to tackling some of the more painful issues of his departure.

Whatever the reason for Laferrière's change in subject matter, it does not appear to arise out of a conscious decision to change his audience as well. He notes that he did not write *L'odeur du café* with a Haitian audience in mind, but rather presumably a Canadian (or more broadly "American") one. The framing of the book corroborates this, as Laferrière provides background information on the location and its culture, background a Haitian reader would not require. In this way, *L'odeur du café* becomes a book about Haiti by an insider for outsiders. But the place Laferrière carved out for himself in Quebec as an insider-outsider complicates this dichotomy, since *Comment*

faire l'amour... made him as much “one of us” (Quebecois) as “one of them” (Haitian), thus producing a confidence in him as a trusted native informant. In Haiti, too, Laferrière operates as both insider and outsider because of his emigration. Even when he writes about Haiti, then—as he does in *L'odeur du café*, *Le goût des jeunes filles*, *Le charme des après-midi sans fin*, *La chair du maître*, *Le cri des oiseaux fous*, *Pays sans chapeau*, and most recently *L'énigme du retour*—from the Haitian perspective, he is to some degree an outsider writing for outsiders and thus not directly addressing Haitians as readers. As a small market, however, with many of its authors living abroad, Haitian literature is rife with insider-outsiders writing (mostly or also) for outsider audiences, and the insider audience largely adapts to reading about itself from the outside in.

The United States

Even when Laferrière's work was not well received in Haiti, the reading public still knew who he was. With smaller markets, like Haiti and Canada, writers can more easily make a large impact, which is not the case for the large literary centers like the United States. Laferrière claims that while everyone recognizes him in Montreal, no one knows him in Miami, a city in which he lived for a dozen years, a move he says he made in part to benefit from that anonymity in order to be left in peace to write and spend time with his family (*J'écris* 58-59). Despite his commercial and critical success in Canada and the fact that his books are already available in English thanks to the translations of Homel, Laferrière has never reached a wide audience south of the border in the United States. As mentioned earlier, the translations, issued by the small Toronto press Coach House, have not been picked up for redistribution by any American publisher, large or small. In 1999, fourteen years after the publication of his first novel, the journal *Callaloo*

devoted a special section to Laferrière because, according to editor Carrol F. Coates, “[i]t is high time that a U.S. public attracted by a comic view of life and the serious pursuit of fiction made their acquaintance with a writer who takes his craft and his readers seriously” (“Meet Dany Laferrière, American” 923). If anyone in the United States might be expected to be familiar with Laferrière’s work already, the readers of *Callaloo* (a scholarly journal dedicated to writing of the African diaspora) would be high on that list. It is especially telling, then, that they require an introduction, not a retrospective, at that point in Laferrière’s career. If *Callaloo* readers have little awareness of him, then he must hardly show up at all on the radar of the American reading public at large, and the general apathy in the U.S. toward translations, as described by Lawrence Venuti, can hardly account for this phenomenon entirely.²³

As discussed above, Laferrière’s novels and Homel’s translations proved current—or relevant—in Quebec, Haiti, and Anglophone Canada because they responded to those contexts and because Laferrière and Homel actively capitalized on the opportunities at hand to generate cultural currency. This often occurred in terms of the writing itself—literary trends in immigrant writing, movements away from ponderous writing styles—or in material conditions—television as an attention-grabbing medium, government grants for translation. The forms of cultural currency in which they were trading, however, did not have the same value in the U.S. context. To use Pound’s formulation, Laferrière had, in a sense, written a check he couldn’t cash in the United States. Not only did his writing fail to register as relevant there, at times it proved downright offensive according to U.S. cultural norms. The title itself of *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, which Laferrière credits with drawing readers

²³ See the Introduction for a discussion for the status of translations in the American market.

into that book, at least initially, serves as a prime example. Coach House published Homel's translation under the title *How to Make Love to a Negro*—the erasure of the last half of the French title is immediately obvious in comparison. While part of the reason for the cut may be merely aesthetic—French-language titles are often entire sentences, whereas English-language titles tend to be shorter—the main motivation appears to have been one of content. The “without getting tired” bit was considered too racy for a more prudish WASP audience. But the purportedly moralistic edit actually makes the title more controversial by eliminating the subversive humor upon which it, and the book as a whole, relies. In referring to the stereotypical sexual prowess and stamina of black men, the title gives an indication of the way Laferrière plays with cliché in the rest of the text. The title contains a stereotype that many people will find offensive, but that is precisely the point. Laferrière floods his text with stereotypes, and by this very overabundance reveals their absurdity.²⁴ By trimming the title, the publishers obscure the way he pushes limits, just as he pushes the title to the limits of length.²⁵ The foreshortened English title—*How to Make Love to a Negro*—reads more ambiguously, and so the potential reader does not get an idea of the novel's project of picking apart racial stereotypes.

A further problem of potential offensiveness is presented by the word “Negro” in the English version of the title. By 1986, when the translation was published, Negro had already become a retrograde term and, at its worst, seriously pejorative. *Nègre*, too, when used by certain people in certain contexts carries a racist connotation, although the history of the French word followed a different path from that of the English Negro,

²⁴ See, Jana Braziel Evans (Summer and Winter 2003) for a Deleuzian interpretation of the deconstruction of stereotypes through excess in Laferrière's novels.

²⁵ Pushes, but doesn't surpass. The idea for the title came from Laferrière's roommate, the inspiration for the character of Bouba, who once said, “How to make love to a Negro when it's raining and you have nothing better to do.” According to Laferrière, “His title was too long, but it was funnier” (*Why Must a Black Writer* 23).

especially in the French Caribbean, where it can be used more neutrally or even as a reappropriation.²⁶ Homel, well aware of the racist baggage *Negro* and *Nègre* carry, spends some time discussing the way he maneuvered through this lexical minefield in his translator's introduction:

When Laferrière uses the potentially derogatory word, *nègre*, the translator has several choices, but he cannot automatically substitute 'black,' despite what current English usage demands. Our word 'black' is simply too free of stereotypes and too politically cool to be used in social satire. In this book, there are very few occasions when 'black,' the politically correct word, can be used if the translator wants to retain Laferrière's dynamic between the sexes and colours, in which blacks will always be *nègre*. I finally decided on 'Negro,' alternating when the occasion called for it. 'Negro' is outdated, it smells of pre-Black Power liberalism, and because of those echoes it is particularly well suited to Laferrière's satirical intent. (Introduction 10)

Homel's logic is sound here, but in order to reach it, the reader needs to get past the title page where the word "Negro" already appears. Paired with the boundary-pushing "without getting tired," the subversive move in the choice of "Negro" remains more conspicuous, but without it or the explanation in the translator's note, a reader without prior knowledge of the book receives no direction in how to approach the potentially pejorative word. Additionally, the photo on the English-language version, though nearly identical to the one described earlier featured on the poster and inside the original Montreal edition, differs in that Laferrière is leaning back on the bench and staring absently to his left rather than typing on the typewriter placed on his lap. Because of this, and the small size of the photo, it is difficult to actually distinguish the typewriter as such, so that Laferrière looks more like a barefoot drunk than "a writer at work" in the tradition of the Beat Generation. This serves as yet another factor contributing to the way the

²⁶ See my article "Translation as Peaceable Resistance" (*Norwich Papers* 18 (Nov. 2010): 115-26) for a full discussion of the word *Nègre* and its translation into English. I ultimately argue that leaving the word untranslated can potentially contribute to a rethinking of linguistic, and by extension societal, formulations of race in the United States.

paratext of the English version tends to reinforce rather than satirize stereotypes around black men.

Thus whereas Laferrière claims a certain talent for coming up with the titles of his books, the English versions have sometimes proven infelicitous. The title can also be held partly to blame for the fact that Laferrière's mostly deeply American book—*Cette grenade dans la main...*—failed to capture the American reading public. The novel's English alias—*Why Must a Black Writer Write about Sex?*—is not completely Homel's or the English publisher's invention; it is the title of one of the chapters in the book. While still a relatively long title, it is not nearly as long as the French one, which relies on a pun impossible to reproduce exactly in English around the word *grenade*, which can mean both “grenade” and “pomegranate.” Thus the original title *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune Nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?* would literally be translated as *That Grenade/Pomegranate in the Young Nègre's Hand—Is It a Weapon or a Fruit?* Although the pun and the length produce an element of humor, there is also a latent violence in the French title that draws directly on the tradition of black American writing. As Anne Marie Miraglia has described in detail (2000), with *Cette grenade...*, Laferrière places himself intertextually into a genealogy which includes Chester Himes, Richard Wright, and most importantly James Baldwin. The narrator even recounts a conversation with Baldwin's ghost in a Brooklyn apartment.

The young black man in Laferrière's title is thus possibly the one fulfilling Baldwin's warning of *The Fire Next Time*, and in fact the last short chapter in Laferrière's original French version, which describes a black youth walking down the

street *grenade* in hand, is called “Feu sur l’Amérique.”²⁷ Homel misses the chance to make the direct connection to Baldwin by translating it as “The Assault on America.” In this sense, the French title locates the novel within a well-known and well-respected movement in black American writing, one that takes a critical, even militant, stance in regards to race relations.²⁸ This is a type of currency already in circulation in the United States to which American readers might respond. The English title, however, mostly serves to reiterate the problems many American readers found with *How to Make Love to a Negro*. It gives the impression that the novel is mostly about sex, whereas this topic occupies remarkably less space than in his preceding “American” texts (*Comment faire l’amour...* and *Éroshima*). In fact, there are no actual erotic scenes in *Why Must...?*, but rather a discourse about sex. The English title, then, seems to trade on the idea that sex sells, but in this case it only reinforces many of the prior assessments in the U.S. of Laferrière as a provocative but substanceless writer, conclusions drawn not so much from having read his books but from the 1989 film adaptation of *Comment faire l’amour....*

Film as a medium has the ability to attract a wider public—indeed reviews of the cinematic *Comment faire l’amour...* outnumber reviews of Laferrière’s books in the American press—and therefore stoke an interest that may lead spectators to become readers of the original text as well. The adaptation of *Comment faire l’amour...* for the screen, however, did more damage to Laferrière’s literary reputation in the United States

²⁷ The title of Baldwin’s book references the spiritual “Mary Don’t You Weep,” which contains the line “God gave Noah the rainbow sign / No more water, the fire next time.” In the book, Baldwin supports peaceful, loving means to overcome racism in the United States, but says that violence may erupt if peaceful measures do not prove effective.

²⁸ Laferrière makes heavy use of intertextual references to other authors or books in his novels, placing himself within a larger American or world context. Often one author in particular serves as the main point of reference for a novel—Saint-John Perse for *Le goût des jeunes filles*, Basho for *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, or Baldwin in this case. Interestingly, in the 2002 expanded version of *Cette grenade dans la main...*, Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* becomes the primary intertext.

than good. To begin with, the title caused even more of a flap than it did on the cover of the novel. The NAACP cried foul over the use of the word “Negro,” and most major newspapers censored the film’s advertisements, truncating the title even more to “How to Make Love.....”; an asterisk directed the reader to the bottom of the ad with the original full title—in French. The reviews published by those same newspapers often lambasted the film. Rita Kempley’s *Washington Post* critique is downright scathing, calling the film “[a] feminist nightmare” that “manages to be as piddling as it is pretentious, as racist as it is sexist, as self-hating as it is self-congratulatory” (B1). Janet Maslin of *The New York Times*, although not nearly as derisive as Kempley, has little positive to say, but of interest is the fact that she apparently has also read the book, which she judges much more favorably than the “sophomoric” film: “This French Canadian film is much less provocative than either its title or the novel on which it is based. Dany Laferrière ... has a much more acerbic and witty voice than the film ever develops” (C10). Ironically, some of the dialogue she finds tiresome comes directly from the novel, and the subplots exploring race relations that she seems to want more of have no precedent in it. The adjective “sophomoric” is also employed by Desson Howe, but specifically in regards to those added subplot scenes involving racist whites. He otherwise finds the film “less a conscience-searing tract than a playful good time. The movie succeeds (and shows its deepest truths) precisely when it doesn’t take itself too seriously” (38).

Strangely enough, Howe’s review appears in *The Washington Post*, on page 38, on the same day Kempley’s withering review was published on page B1 of the Style section. In fact, Laferrière was much talked about in the *Post* that day, with another

article by Howe on page 43 as well as a review of the novel by Indian novelist and journalist Raj Kamal Jha alongside Kempley's film review on B1. One may well ask why all the stories were not packaged together, especially the two pieces by Howe: his more-or-less positive review and his short article about Laferrière's reaction to the critical and public backlash against the film. That article, "Laferrière: Young, Gifted and Censored," represents the writer as an "animated, witty, and amiable" provocateur who once "did the weather in the nude," but actually does little to get to the substance behind the provocation, except for one short paragraph quoting Laferrière's explanation of the novel's "sex in a political perspective" (43). Howe's two articles taken together thus provide a picture of Laferrière and his novel and film as fun and engaging, but not especially serious. Jha's look at the book and the controversy surrounding its film adaptation is the most positive and thoughtful of the four articles, and by far also the longest. Heavily sprinkled with direct quotes from Laferrière, the piece also does the most to give the author's perspective and delve into the complexity of his project in which "the sugary coating of humor [is used] to force the distasteful pill down the readers' throats," the distasteful pill, that is, of "the immigrant's social and psychological alienation" (B1). Anne Vassal (1989), in a comparison of the novel and its film adaptation, indeed argues that the novel offers a bi-level reading—a popular one on the surface, for pleasure, like Howe's, and a deeper, more intellectual one like Jha's—but that the film essentially dumbs down the material, eliminating the density and gravity of the material.

Jha's review shows that the reception in the United States of Laferrière's book by those who had actually taken the time to read it was much more welcoming than the

reactionary response of groups such as the NAACP who could not get past the film, or even its title. If Laferrière did not receive much consideration from the popular press, however, the academy actively engaged with his work. It is perhaps ironic that a writer considered frivolous in the mass media should be taken seriously by the intelligentsia, as the opposite is generally the case. Scholars began writing articles on Laferrière's texts relatively early in his career, although as already mentioned, many of those papers focused on Canadian issues and appeared in Canadian journals. A number of university dissertations have also included Laferrière, or even concentrated entirely on his oeuvre. The author has accepted invitations to speak at colloquiums and conferences on a variety of topics, from race to exile, from Caribbean to African diaspora writing, and so on. The interest in Laferrière has not trickled down into the general public in the United States, however, and additional reasons must account for why his work has not reached or resonated with American readers the same way it did for their neighbors to the North.

As discussed above, Laferrière's early popularity in Quebec derived from the title of his first novel (altered in translation), his television appearances (limited to the local media market), and his insider-outsider status. As regards this last element, the appeal in Francophone Canada of Laferrière's outsidership—as a black immigrant male reflecting on Quebecois society—does not necessarily improve his reception in the United States. When Laferrière examines the role of black men in a multicultural society, his perspective is one of integration from the exterior. But while there are certainly recent black immigrants to the United States (as well as blacks who have been in Canada for generations), the majority of American blacks have roots in the country that date to the era of slavery. Their experience as minorities in a multicultural context is thus governed

by a very different history. Laferrière himself has discussed the way his perspective on racial issues diverges from that of American blacks because he was born in a country where the history of race contrasts sharply with that in either the U.S. or Canada.

According to him, the fact that the slaves in Haiti took their independence by force and eliminated most of the white population at the time of the Revolution (either by expelling or massacring them) means that Haitians today are less complexed in their relationships with white people:

I don't feel that constant pain, that feeling of impotence, that I notice in other Blacks when they're faced with a White person. You get the impression that in their case there's a problem that hasn't been settled. A problem of physical violence. A tremendous slap in the face that hasn't been given. (*J'écris* 31)

And yet in Laferrière's fiction, black men continue to slap white men in the face through their "explosive" sex with white women. The desire for the white woman functions as part of a larger desire for all the "rights" of the white male denied to the black male, material or otherwise. In *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*, Michelle M. Wright describes the politics of sex and race in the West and identifies the white woman as a metaphor for the nation, where the white male is her citizen and the black male an "interloper" (129). This is the sort of discourse with which Laferrière openly plays, with Vieux ironically taking on the role of the dangerous and hypersexualized interloper, what he calls "the Black Stud" (*How to Make Love* 94). The outsider immigrant black male in Laferrière's fiction, however, manipulates that stereotypical discourse in ways that have less relevance to the insider black male in the United States. Vieux and his immigrant acquaintances from Africa and the Caribbean dupe the Westmount girls by claiming to come straight from the bush, by calling up images of primitivism and cannibalism. The technique relies on the girls' ignorance of

the Third World and the people who live there, a technique that just won't work if the black man in question grew up down the street. Furthermore, American readers, who have little investment in the internal political and social struggles of Quebec, will also take less enjoyment from the way the upper-class Anglophone girls are made to look foolish. If Laferrière's novel is humorous, it actually asks the reader to laugh *with* the black man *at* the white woman. In a long-overdue published critique (2011) on this subject, Lori Saint-Martin has methodically shown how in *Comment faire l'amour...* "[t]he existence of racism is made to excuse, even justify sexism, which becomes the base for black men's affirmation of identity—one kind of discrimination can thus hide another" (60).²⁹ While Quebecois readers might displace this sexism as an attack not on white women but on a privileged minority of white women, American readers are much more likely to react the way Kempling did in her *Washington Post* review of the film.³⁰

There are other ways in which the kind of insider currency, such as the topographical specificity of Montreal, that Laferrière capitalizes on within Quebec functions differently in the United States. While French Canadians will get pleasure from feeling like an insider in Laferrière's fictional world, readers unfamiliar with these landmarks are more likely to react with indifference or even a feeling of exclusion because they lack certain information, especially since Laferrière does not provide background information for the novels set in Montreal as he does for those set in Haiti. In the United States, another writer, Edwige Danticat, is able to offer that kind of recognition to the American reader since she herself resides there and places her fiction

²⁹ See also my forthcoming article in *Callaloo* "Of Male Exiles and Female Nations: 'Sexual Errantry' in Haitian Immigrant Literature" for a critique of the way Laferrière reinforces the trope of woman as nation at the same time as he promotes a cosmopolitan male subject.

³⁰ Saint-Martin also cites Cameron Bailey's opinion that black readers have felt Laferrière was aiming for a white male audience (64). Interestingly, Laferrière's readership from the beginning has been disproportionately female, at least according to him (*J'écris* 172).

within that context. The action of her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, for example, is divided between New York and Haiti. Danticat's location in the U.S. thus gives her the same appealing insider-outsider status that Laferrière enjoys in his adopted country. In world literature's current formulation, there is a tendency to believe that the public's interest in foreign places is limited and that the market cannot sustain more than one representative or representation of each place—unless that place happens to be politically or socially relevant at the time, such as Eastern Europe during the Cold War (see Chapters 3 and 5) or the Middle East currently. This is the phenomenon Damrosch refers to as the “literary Miss Universe competition” (“Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age” 48). In the United States, the title of Haitian writer is clearly held by Edwidge Danticat, who immigrated to America from Haiti as a child and writes in English. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), for example, achieved vast commercial success, largely due to its inclusion in Oprah's Book Club, and Danticat's follow-up short stories, *Krik? Krak!* made her a finalist for the National Book Award. Her subsequent books have also been well received in the U.S. market, and she enjoys a respected position within the American literary community.³¹ She possesses a clear advantage over other “Haitian” writers in the American market in that she writes directly in English, thus avoiding the marketing stigma of translation and cutting out a step in the circulation process, a step which costs the publisher time and money.³² With her position as an important writer already well established, Danticat occupies the market space in the U.S. for “Haitian” writers and thus obstructs the introduction of texts by others.

³¹ For example, she won the American Book Award in 1999 with *The Farming of Bones* and a National Book Critics Circle Award in 2008 for her autobiography *Brother, I'm Dying*. In 2009 she received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, known as the Genius Fellowship. Several of her books have made it onto the *New York Times* best-seller list.

³² See the Introduction for a discussion of the status of translated work in the United States.

France

As in Haiti and the United States, *Comment faire l'amour...* did not achieve the same success in France as it did in Canada, although the reaction there did not involve any vehement backlash. Haitians largely regarded Laferrière as a non-serious writer playing up to a white audience; Americans outside of academic circles saw him as a juvenile provocateur, and at worst a racist, sexist pig. In France, at least originally, the book was a non-starter for quite different reasons, paratextual reasons dealing not with taste but with legal matters. The cover of the first edition in French Canada featured a painting by Matisse that Vieux mentions in the book, a painting for which Laferrière's editor did not have permission to reproduce. When the book was brought over to France, Matisse's family blocked its sale. It was distributed in France three more times by various presses, but, in Laferrière's words "never took off" (*J'écris* 178). Understanding why the book didn't take off in France is more complicated.

One major reason has to do with a different sort of cultural currency in France for literature from the Francophone Caribbean, which relates to the historicopolitical situation of the French-speaking islands. While Haiti gained its independence in 1804 through armed revolution, Guadeloupe and Martinique remain part of France to this day as *départements d'outre-mer*. The continued governmental ties play themselves out in a variety of ways: economic dependence, institutionalized French cultural dominance through the education system, and freer movement of people and resources across the Atlantic, although in a lopsided fashion. Quite simply, the connection means that France is much more present in the daily lives and in the minds of the DOM-TOM citizens than it is for Haitians. Questions of (neo)colonialism thus come up in the literature of

Guadeloupe and Martinique in much more direct and systematic ways, as Laferrière mentioned, than they do for him as a Haitian in Quebec.

Just such a type of writing—known as *Créolité*—came into vogue in the late 1980s and 1990s. Founded in Martinique by linguist Jean Bernabé and authors Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, *Créolité* involves the celebration of traditional Creole culture and advocates the use of Creole idiom and a written style that reflects the art of oral literary forms. The *Créolistes* employ this style in order to deal with their heterogeneous and hierarchical cultural heritage, which, at the most simplified level, can be described as a dichotomy of written French over the Creole spoken word. The result, at least in the case of those like Chamoiseau who do it well, is a virtuoso innovative Creolization of the French language as well as a digressive structure and style marked by the rhythms of the Creole storyteller. Precisely the opposite of Laferrière’s writing, with his short sentences and plain language. Unsurprisingly, he finds the language in *Créolité* style “overwrought, too formal, too florid. . . . It attracts the reader’s attention to too great an extent to the words” (*J’écris* 227). For Laferrière, *Créolité* gives rise to a “veritable verbal diarrhea” (*J’écris* 227).

Although *Créolité* is not to Laferrière’s taste, it certainly is to the metropole’s. All ten of Chamoiseau’s novels, the first in 1986, were originally released by Gallimard, one of the most important French publishing houses. In 1992 he received the Prix Goncourt, arguably France’s most prestigious literary award, for his novel *Texaco. Créolité*, with its distinctive style, benefitted from and contributed to Western literary trends of the time, such as the postmodern and multicultural turns as well as an interest in writing based on

oral forms, or *oraliture*.³³ In effect, some critics insist that Chamoiseau and his fellow *Créolistes* cater to French tastes and preconceptions about the postcolonial Caribbean and thereby only reinforce offensive stereotypes. Caribbean studies scholar A. James Arnold contends that the commercial success of their literature is due to the fact that it is

... formally designed to appeal to the neo-colonialist desire of the European narratee to see in the West Indies a timeless society, forever playing out the same plot ... It is supremely ironic that these authors, who embrace political positions of independence for their island, have fashioned an aesthetic of dependence. (47)

Rather than damn them, as Arnold does, I suggest we view their work as a different type of strategic exoticism which both plays up to certain expectations at the same time as it exerts a subversive potential. The appeal of *Créolistes* to a French audience comes again from a dual insider-outsider status: they are French writers, although not from the metropole; they apply current trends in metropolitan writing (postmodernism, etc.) to oral forms.

With the substantial difference between his work and that of *Créolité*—the “standard,” as it were, for Caribbean writing—it cannot be mere coincidence that Laferrière finally began to have important publications in France once the *Créolité* rage had passed its heyday. It wasn’t until 2005, twenty years after *Comment faire l’amour...* first appeared, that one of his novels (*Le goût des jeunes filles*) was picked up by a prestigious French publishing house, Grasset. He had already edged his way into the French market through *Serpent à Plumes*, a small, stable company (now part of a larger corporation) but without the stature of the *grandes maisons d’édition* such as Gallimard, which Laferrière has called “not [his] style” (*J’écris* 177). It was with *Serpent à Plumes*

³³ This distinctive, innovative style has not kept Chamoiseau’s novels from being translated into English. Several of his books have appeared in English, with the translators using various innovative strategies of their own to convey a sense of *Créolité* in the target text. This stands in opposition to Homel’s statement regarding Laferrière’s texts that he does not believe the Creoleness can be communicated in English.

in 1999 that *Comment faire l'amour...* finally “took off” (although not nearly to the same extent that it did in Canada) because “it’s the first time it’s being regarded as a book that’s completely integrated into a global project of publication and not as a desirable object asked to perform on demand” (*J’écris* 178-79). It seems that the editors at Serpent à Plumes, then, considered Laferrière’s work—and Laferrière himself—in regards to the types of currency operative in France, and the result seems to be a more serious version of the Quebecois clown.

The global project at Serpent à Plumes involved the simultaneous release of Laferrière’s newest novels with the Montreal editions, beginning in 1997 with *Pays sans chapeau*, as well as the re-release of selected older works.³⁴ Two older texts—*Cette grenade...* (Serpent à Plumes) and *Le goût des jeunes filles* (Grasset and Gallimard)—significantly appeared in revised and expanded versions, more than double in length. The augmentation of the novels contradicts the author’s own preference for short texts: “My sole fear is to bore the reader. I hate guests who don’t know when to leave” (*J’écris* 168). In inflating these texts, Laferrière realizes his fear, hobbling the fast pace and, in the case of *Le goût des jeunes filles*, adding a heavy-handed didactic element. That novel, aside from a few scenes at the beginning and end, chronicles a weekend Vieux spent as an adolescent in Port-au-Prince with a group of young women in 1971, a narrative he relates to us in the form of a movie script. In the expanded version, the imagined film is interspersed with excerpts from the journal of one of the girls, cutting the flow and digressing into labored reflections on the class and social structure in Haiti. Laferrière

³⁴ Publications at Serpent à Plumes according to the date of their first issue are as follows: *Pays sans chapeau* 1997; *Le charme des après-midi sans fin* 1998; *Comment faire l'amour...* 1999; *La chair du maître* 2000; *Le cri des oiseaux fous* 2000; *L'odeur du café* 2001; *Cette grenade...* 2002 (expanded version). At Grasset: *Le goût des jeunes filles* 2005 (expanded); *Vers le sud* 2006; *Je suis un écrivain japonais* 2008; *L'énigme du retour* 2009. Laferrière also has one publication at Gallimard: *Le goût des jeunes filles* (expanded) 2007.

appears to be self-consciously aware of the potential ungainliness of his additions. The new female narrator reflects on the writing in her journal:

Human nature knows how to adapt itself... Well, that seems like the start of one of those essays Sister Agnes hated so much. I know, I know, Sister Agnes would have written right in the middle of the page with a hot-tempered red pencil: "Be less predictable"... I feel Sister Agnes behind my neck, waylaying me some more: "Heavy, pretentious sentences, what's gotten into you...?" (212, first ellipsis original)

While the revised, expanded version makes for a much less enjoyable read, it does correspond to several types of currency that could improve his circulation in the French market, and create an image of a more serious, cosmopolitan writer. By providing a sustained female point of view in the journal, Laferrière can counter accusations of sexism that have dogged him since *Comment faire l'amour...*, especially as feminist critiques of literature have only gained more and more space in mainstream Western markets. Although inelegant stylistically, the journal, in its background information on Haiti, also plays up the native informant function of the novel, written by an insider for outsiders. Finally, the addition of the journal results in a further mixing of textual forms and genres in the novel (which already includes the film script as well as the novelistic prose that opens and closes the book), thus matching the postmodernist trend of layered narratives.³⁵

The expanded version of *Le goût des jeunes filles* also served quite another purpose: it offered viewers of the 2005 film adaptation something they hadn't already

³⁵ Rachel Douglas has written a study of the expanded version of *Cette grenade...* in which she argues that the additions are part of an overall process of rewriting and contribute to Laferrière's program of inserting himself into American space. For her "the key process" of Laferrière's revision and American Autobiography as a whole is one of "accumulation" (76). She mentions also a personal interview with Laferrière in which he expresses the opinion that rewriting can get out of control and metastasize like a cancer (76). Douglas does not seem to think Laferrière's writing has gone too far in this direction, but I argue that accumulation for accumulation's sake does not add much to the novel as a whole. Whereas Douglas sees more of the same, but also from new angles, I find mostly more of the same in such a way that it takes the punch out of Laferrière's punchy writing style.

seen. While the movie of *Comment faire l'amour...* drove potential readers away in the U.S., in France *Goût* helped instead to draw them in. The 2005 film *Vers le sud*, starring Charlotte Rampling and based on an eponymous chapter from *La chair du Maître* also surely served as the impetus for that book's re-release in France, slightly revised and under the name of the film rather than the original text. Film-goers in France prompted to read the book may have been disappointed, however, to discover that only 30 of the 250 pages had anything to do with the movie they had seen. Regardless, the possibility of gaining readers by way of film appears to be what finally induced the *grandes maisons d'édition* to publish Laferrière's work. *Le goût des jeunes filles* and *Vers le sud* were his first two big (re-)releases in France, in both cases one year following the film production. After years of small print runs in the French Hexagon, Laferrière had finally made it big there by way of another media, not unlike the importance of television in his Quebecois popularity. Attaining a top-tier-press book contract operates as a consecration, and in the case of Laferrière it set off a chain reaction of consecrations that has yet to reach its end point. In the very act of re-issuing his old texts, Grasset christened him as an important author worthy of the *grandes maisons*, and they thus published his two following new novels, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* and *L'énigme du retour*. If being published at a *grande maison* makes one a writer of worth, that worth was rewarded in 2009 with the prestigious Prix Médicis. The same novel published at a different press would not guarantee the award; all of the Médicis laureates since its inception in 1958 have come from the high-status houses: mostly Gallimard, Grasset, Minuit, Seuil (36 of 42 total), and a few from Albin Michel, Flammarion, Hachette, and Mercure de France. If Grasset consecrated Laferrière as an important writer in France, the Prix Médicis consecrated him

as one of *the most* important writers in France, and it may be this last consecration that contributes to his finally achieving a positive commercial reception in the United States. Whereas the Médicis alone might not do it, a factor quite out of anyone's control could tip the scales.

Earthquake repercussions

On January 12, 2010, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake hit Haiti, its epicenter near the capital Port-au-Prince. Overcrowding and poorly constructed buildings led to an absolutely devastating number of victims and little remaining infrastructure to support relief efforts. In the end, about 230,000 people are estimated to have died. Regrettably, it took a catastrophe such as this for Haiti to be noticed. The satirical newspaper *The Onion* called biting attention to this fact with its article “Massive Earthquake Reveals Entire Island Civilization Called ‘Haiti’” (*The Onion* online). Laferrière expresses similar sentiments:

At the moment of Independence, the Occidental world turned away from the new republic, which had to savor its triumph alone. ... And now today all eyes are turned toward Haiti. During the last two weeks of January 2010, Haiti was seen more than it had been during the last two centuries. It wasn't because of a coup d'état, or one of those bloody stories that mix voodoo and cannibalism—it was because of an earthquake. An event that no one has control over. For once, our misfortune was not exotic. What happened to us could happen anywhere. No one is safe from the wrath of the gods. (*Tout bouge autour de moi* 110-11)

In their hour of greatest suffering, Haitians gained their humanity in the eyes of the West, a humanity born of empathy—“What happened to us could happen anywhere.” With the earthquake as the center of the international news for days, Haitians finally had the attention of the rest of the world, and people were for once willing, even keen, to listen to Haitians talk about themselves, to try to empathize with and understand what a human being goes through at a time like that.

Danticat, as the “token” Haitian writer in the American literary market, became the go-to spokesperson in the U.S. for a high-culture Haitian perspective on the earthquake (musician Wyclef Jean being the popular culture spokesperson). She was invited for a number of interviews and public events, and *The New Yorker* published an elegantly written essay in its Comment section.³⁶ While Americans relied mostly on the words of Danticat as the only major Haitian literary figure writing directly in English, the Francophone world, if for no other reason than a linguistic one, had a much larger supply of texts by Haitian authors available to them. The French newspaper *La Libération*, for example, published a special section called *Je t’écris Haïti* (19 Jan 2010) that collected the responses of eight Haitian writers who had lived through the earthquake. As it happened, the timing of the earthquake coincided in Port-au-Prince with the conference *Étonnants voyageurs*, which gathered Haitian writers from throughout the diaspora, and thus a larger than usual number of literary figures, including Laferrière, were present to experience the catastrophe first-hand.³⁷

When the Canadian government gave Laferrière the opportunity to leave Haiti a few days later, he accepted and immediately began bearing witness to the tragedy in print, on the radio and television, and on the internet. In Canada, as a well-known television and literary personality, he already had a large audience eager to hear his perspective. With some international status, foreign media outlets also retransmitted his response, notably in two translations into English of excerpts from a diary that he had kept (originally published by the French weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* on Jan. 21) and of an interview he gave to *Le Monde*. While the first appeared on the Caribbean specialist

³⁶ Danticat, Edwidge. “A little while.” *New Yorker*. 1 Feb 2010: 19.

³⁷ One of them, Georges Anglade, an immigrant to Canada, died in a collapsed building along with his wife.

website Repeating Islands, the latter was reprinted by the Huffington Post. Thus although Laferrière did not reach the top tier of American media, as had Danticat with her *New Yorker* piece, he still managed to circulate in fairly large media markets. Further, Laferrière's recent Médicis Prize win garnered him an even more privileged place from which to serve as a cultural spokesperson, especially in France. The end result is a kind of mutual marketing where the writer's notoriety from his recent Médicis favors his selection as a spokesperson for Haiti—allowing him a position from which to provide an informed and nuanced perspective on the earthquake and on Haiti—and where the interest in Haiti generated by the earthquake transfers over into interest in Laferrière. The linkage becomes self-perpetuating: the more Laferrière speaks in the media about the earthquake, the more attention he gets for his own work, and the more his work is known, the more he is asked to speak in the media.

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that Laferrière was among the first to write and publish a book about the earthquake.³⁸ Already known for his fast production, he penned the book in only two weeks. *Tout bouge autour de moi* [*Everything's Moving Around Me*] came out in March 2010, just two months after the earthquake, and like most of Laferrière's writing, it takes the form of short sections—a paragraph or a few pages—each describing a separate scene or sentiment. Significantly, it was published by a Haitian expatriate press, Mémoire d'encrier, a small Montreal-based house run by Laferrière's friend Rodney Saint-Éloi, who had also gone to Port-au-Prince for the Étonnants voyageurs conference and was sitting next to Laferrière in their hotel's restaurant when the tremors first began. In the prologue to *Tout bouge*, Laferrière explains that he actually

³⁸ Laferrière's book was shortly preceded in March 2010 by *Pour Haïti*, edited by Martinican Suzanne Dracius, a collection of short pieces written by 129 different authors from Haiti and throughout the world. Profits from the book go to Bibliothèques sans frontières.

owed Saint-Éloi another book, *Notes à l'usage d'un jeune écrivain*, whose proofs he should have been correcting during the two weeks he composed the manuscript for *Tout bouge*. He claims that he hadn't intended to write a text about the earthquake; in fact, he had already refused multiple offers to do so (*Tout bouge* 11). But he found that the subject became an obsession, and being a firm believer in his own advice—"Don't look for a subject, it's the subject that will find you" (9)—he followed his compulsion and set *Notes* aside for the moment. He also expresses his belief that *Tout bouge* is "a book that can only be written in urgency" (12). It's a case of striking while the iron is hot.

Laferrière is not so much interested in contributing to a mythology of the earthquake, or of writing the Great Earthquake Novel. That, he believes, will come after (128). The project of *Tout bouge* is rather to participate in the very immediate discourse about the earthquake—to complement, counter, or complicate other representations, especially those in the popular media. In addition to writing the book for himself, to work through his personal, emotional response, he is writing it "for others. Those who weren't present" (10). Thus *Tout bouge* communicates an insider Haitian perspective to an outsider audience.

Laferrière's position as a writer of some renown outside of Haiti is what permits him to reach those who weren't there. As he himself says, "this damned Médicis has to be good for something" (87). The self-reflexive epigraph to the book even quotes the Médicis-winning *L'énigme du retour*. Several passages throughout *Tout bouge*, in fact, assume a reader familiar with Laferrière for more than his Médicis. When referring to a friend he thinks may have died in the earthquake, for example, he mentions that the two of them "used to meet up at Izaza, that nightclub I described in *Comment faire l'amour*

avec un nègre sans se fatiguer” (56). Such a statement presupposes that the reader is not only aware of the fact that Laferrière is the author of that book, now 25 years old, but also that the reader has read that book and knows just what bar the author means. Just as *Comment faire l’amour...* functioned to create a doubly appealing insider/outsider status for Laferrière by placing him as a multicultural immigrant who was still “one of us,” the reference to the former book in *Tout bouge* continues to reify that dual status; his long history as an author in Francophone Canada forms a bond between him and the reader which makes him a trusted source for information, as does his residual outsidership as someone who is native to the country in question. He is able to play upon his past marketability to make himself more marketable in the current situation. This is in no way to condemn Laferrière for such a move, or to suggest that he is cashing in on the earthquake to sell books, or at least not his own.³⁹ In this case, the earthquake does give Laferrière the opportunity to raise both his recognizability and sales, but it also allows him enough cultural currency to be able to circulate a competing representation of Haiti in the international market.

With the attention toward Haiti generated by the earthquake, the U.S. market may be ready to support more than one writer from the island in a substantial way. What gives Laferrière the edge over other Haitian writers in occupying that place is the confluence of factors granted to him by the circulation of his work in not only Haiti, but also France, Quebec, and Anglophone Canada. The conference of the Médicis in France, which led to further honors such as a starring role at the 2010 Paris Salon du Livre, consecrate him as a writer of import since the French scene continues to function, as Pascale Casanova

³⁹ The profits from *Tout bouge autour de moi* will be used to help finance the publication of young Haitian authors by Mémoire d’encrier.

argues, as the arbiter of serious literary tastes. *L'énigme du retour* earned Laferrière a further spate of awards, including the Grand Prix du Livre du Montréal (November 2009) and the Blue Metropolis International Literary Grand Prix (October 2009), a prize that carries with it \$10,000. He was also recently named the Personnalité Canadienne de l'Année by Radio-Canada. Considered a cultural periphery, Quebec's prize laureates receive less literary authority than do those in France, but the accumulation of awards in Laferrière's case multiplies their significance. If he has become one of many important writers in France with his *Médicis*, his spate of wins in Quebec positions him as perhaps *the most* important Quebecois writer of the moment, thus allowing him the potential to accede to the role of token Quebecois writer in the American market. Access to that market for Francophone Canadian authors requires translation into English, and Laferrière also benefits from a long history of having his work translated as well as a new resurgence following a long hiatus of publication of his work in translation. In 2009, Douglas & McIntyre issued *Heading South*, a translation of *Vers le sud* done by Wayne Grady. While *Vers le Sud* first appeared in France in 2006, as mentioned earlier, it is nearly identical to *La chair du Maître*, which dates back to 1997 and marked the first of Laferrière's texts that Homel did not translate.⁴⁰ The film also probably contributed to the decision to finally produce an English-language translation of the book, whose title (*Heading South*), matches that of the film's English-language release. In July 2010, Douglas & McIntyre followed up *Heading South* with *I am a Japanese Writer*, this time with Homel back in the role of translator. They also re-released *How to Make Love to a Negro*, with the remarkable difference that *Without Getting Tired* has been reinstated

⁴⁰ The other novels not translated by Homel, or anyone else, in the interval between 1997 and 2009 were *Le charme des après-midi sans fin* and *Le cri des oiseaux fous*.

parenthetically into the title. Laferrière's recent slew of literary awards as well as the earthquake undoubtedly play more than a small part in the renewed interest in publishing his work in English, and indeed *L'enigme du retour* appeared in a 2011 Homel translation as *The Return*.

While the already-published translations have not been picked up by a U.S. publishing house, other channels are now available for widespread distribution. For example, whereas in 2006 none of Laferrière's work was available through purchase directly from Amazon.com, only from independent sellers in its Marketplace, the corporation itself now offers a few of his titles for sale, including *How to Make Love to a Negro (Without Getting Tired)*. Twenty-five years later, the overlapping combination of the author's circulation through a number of centers and peripheries may have created the opportunity for that book to find a U.S. readership. Not exactly overnight, but Laferrière may finally be posed to conquer America.

CHAPTER 3

Milan Kundera: East is East, East is West

*Interviewer: ...your play was a great success throughout the entire world.
Milan Kundera: Well yes, but precisely because it was misunderstood. It's like that very often: one almost always owes one's success to the fact of being misunderstood.*⁴¹

The play in question here is Kundera's *Keeper of the Keys*, which French interviewer Normand Biron has just called a play about the Czechoslovak Resistance under German occupation. Disappointed, Kundera explains that the historical setting of the theater piece is only a "pretext," a "ruse" that allows him to address its "true subject," which he never names (21). He gives the impression that he has heard this misinterpretation many times before and has grown weary of it, and yet Biron simply can't seem to help himself. Like the majority of Western readers, Biron has preconceived notions about what a Czechoslovak writer during the Cold War would, or even ought to, be writing about.⁴² As a result, this 1979 interview devolves into a contest for Kundera's identity, Biron perpetuating the notions circulating in his culture, and Kundera desperately trying to assert his own version of himself and his work.

⁴¹ Biron 21. Unless otherwise noted in the Bibliography, all translations are my own.

⁴² Here and throughout this chapter, I use the words "Czechoslovak" and "Czechoslovakia" since I am mainly discussing the period prior to the country's split into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic on Jan. 1, 1993. Czechoslovakia was the country into which Kundera was born, the country he left behind, and so in many ways the country he describes in his nostalgic writing. Unfortunately, many people mistakenly continue to use these terms to refer to the present day. In Chapter 5 on post-1989 writing, I switch to the current "Czech" and "Czech Republic."

But as Kundera observes, those other notions—those “misunderstandings”—had led in part to his success. By the time of this interview, he had already become internationally famous, with several translations of his work into the major languages of French and English. As we shall see, the perception of Kundera as a dissident under communism suffering for his art launched him into the world literature limelight. His biography certainly suited that perception in a number of ways. Born in 1929, Kundera ran afoul of the communist party in Soviet-occupied former Czechoslovakia and had his books banned from 1970 onwards. He left for France in 1975, had his Czech citizenship revoked in 1979, and became a French citizen in 1981. Since 1991 he has been writing his novels in French, while he began publishing essays originally penned in French even earlier. There are, of course, parts of his biography that contest the one-sided representation of Kundera as a die-hard dissident in the Western imagination. Before his disillusionment with communism, he was an engaged member of the Party, and after his disillusionment he quarreled with dissident golden-boy (and future president of postcommunist Czechoslovakia) Václav Havel about the best response to Soviet occupation. Regardless, Kundera’s entrance onto the Western literary scene in the unasked-for guise of a political writer helped launch his now illustrious international career in which he enjoys both popular and critical praise. Indeed, although the Cold War political currency that gave Kundera his opportunity to hit the world stage may be one that he rejects, it has undoubtedly granted him a platform from which to “correct” the misunderstandings about his work that gave him that platform in the first place.

One of Kundera’s main objections to the way his work circulates is his classification as an Eastern European writer, and all that that implies, in the Western

literary market, especially during the Cold War. While as we saw in the last chapter Dany Laferrière, born in Haiti and residing in Quebec, claims an American (that is, North American) identity over a Haitian or Canadian one, Kundera casts off the label of Eastern European novelist in favor of Central European and ultimately European novelist. The term “European novelist” functions almost redundantly for Kundera because he views Europe as the privileged location of the novelistic tradition and therefore the context against which all novels should be evaluated. I will deal more fully with Kundera’s mappings of Europe at the end of this chapter. First I focus on his definition of the novel, although that definition is both a product and producer of the Europe Kundera constructs. Kundera’s definition of the novel, even when not directly addressing his own work, guides the reader in what he considers the correct understanding of his texts and those of his fellow novelists.

Kundera elaborates his ideas about the history and role of the novel in his essay collections: *The Art of the Novel* (1986/1988), *Testaments Betrayed* (1993/1995), *The Curtain* (2005/2006), and most recently *Encounter* (2009/2010).⁴³ Far from a systematized, chronological look at the evolution of the novel, these books instead work and rework several novels, authors, and themes in a sort of repetition and variation—to use a musical term common to Kundera’s textual practice.⁴⁴ The effect of his study is thus not culminating but cumulative. From these books, it is possible to define and analyze Kundera’s own theory of world literature and the global circulation of the novel, providing key insights into the way he has presented his own novels to the public and reacted to both critics and supporters. Indeed, although Kundera is often dealing here

⁴³ The dates here refer to the release of the French edition followed by the release of the English translation.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Gillian B. Pierce, “Theme and Variation: Milan Kundera, Denis Diderot, and the Art of the Novel,” *The Comparatist* 33 (May 2009): 132-55.

with other novelists, he authorizes the application of what he has to say to his own novels by such statements as the one he makes in an essay on Francis Bacon: “When one artist speaks about another, he is always talking (by ricochet, by way of detour) about himself, and therein lies the interest of his judgment” (*Encounter* 23).

While, according to Kundera, lyrical poetry sinks into the realm of the ego, of the lyrical “I” that seeks to impart a Truth to the reader, he himself champions “the *radical autonomy* of the novel” (*Art of the Novel* 117, emphasis original). In his 1979 interview with Biron, Kundera systematically rebuffs attempts to classify his texts as autobiographical or political, two modes for which he has an extreme distaste. Instead, Kundera’s novels answer to a higher calling: “What interested me was not historical description but the problems, if you will, of a metaphysical, existential, anthropological nature ... in short, the so-called eternal human problems illuminated by the projector of a concrete historical situation” (19). Kundera’s novelistic project is not to bear witness or to support a particular ideological point of view, Western or otherwise. He aims, rather, to call into question the received knowledge that circulates in society and to rework—stylistically and philosophically—the “eternal human problems.” I will return to Kundera’s assumption that the “eternal human problems” are self-evident in a moment, but for now let us stay with his rebuttal of the way his texts have been read.

In the interview, Biron at times slips into reading Kundera’s texts through those ideological points of view, which Kundera then refutes. His main complaint here is that he has been “misunderstood,” or in the original French “*mal compris*.” That is, Biron and others like him have not found Kundera’s work incomprehensible; they have formed an understanding of the texts, but according to Kundera, they have understood them poorly,

or in the “wrong way.” The larger issue here, therefore, is what it means to “understand” a text or an author, especially from another culture, and this issue is central to the field of world literature where contact with other literatures is not merely an exercise in scholarly analysis but is often called upon to serve a humanistic function. What, then, does it mean to understand the Other? In approaching this question, I put Kundera’s definition of understanding in conversation with that of Martinican theorist, poet, and novelist Edouard Glissant. Such a comparison proves useful in that, while they both object to reductionism, for Glissant reduction occurs through understanding, but for Kundera understanding is a means of overcoming it. These diverging definitions consequently bring out the conflicts and concords between a so-called universal humanism in the European tradition and postcolonial interventions in that tradition. In the world literature classroom, bringing such issues to the surface demonstrates the need to situate for our students not only the text but also our method of approaching it.

Glissant uses the etymology of the verb *comprendre* to make a point about the way that “understanding” functions as a means of control in the West. He draws attention to the French verb’s Latin antecedent, *comprehendere* (which means to seize) in order to claim that *comprendre* “contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation” (*Poetics of Relation* 191-92). Indeed, this sense of incorporation follows the word as it enters the English language as “comprise.” Thus for Glissant the process of “understanding” a text actually involves inserting it into one’s own system of norms: “In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce” (*Poetics of*

Relation 190). The “ideal” here is actually the local masquerading as the universal. The text is *subjected to* a system of norms different from the one in which it was created and in the process becomes a *subject* of that system, not in the sense of having philosophical agency but rather in the sense of being subordinate to and under the dominion of an Other. The early reception of Kundera into the Western European and American markets, for example, occurred in large part due to an understanding there of his texts that matched certain expectations of what writing from his part of the world is and should be like.

Glissant’s understanding (*compréhension*), then, is an act of enclosure, appropriation, reduction (*Poetics of Relation* 190-192). Kundera in his essays rails against this type of reception, specifically calling out critics who “reduce” (see for example *Art of the Novel* 17, 131). But in his terminology, understanding is actually the opposite of reduction. To reduce a text is to view and interpret it from only one angle, to focus on one aspect alone and attempt to draw a Truth from it, a practice Kundera denounces in strong terms: “I have always, deeply, violently, detested those who look for a *position* (political, philosophical, religious, whatever) in a work of art rather than searching it for an *effort to know* [*connaître*], to understand [*comprendre*], to grasp [*saisir*] this or that aspect of reality” (*Testaments Betrayed* 91, emphases original). The effort mentioned here is of prime importance, since for Kundera the novel does not deal with certainties or easy answers. As we have seen, Kundera privileges the novel as the genre which underscores the different manifestations of human existence and avoids imparting the Truth: “Outside the novel, we’re in the realm of affirmation: everyone is sure of his statements ... Within the universe of the novel, however, no one affirms: it is the realm of play and hypotheses” (*Art of the Novel* 78). For example, the most simplified

version of Western Cold War ideology demarcates communism as “bad” and “dissidence” under communism as good. But as François Ricard points out, novelists like Kundera refuse to take sides: “[I]t’s *all politics*, (and not only regimes on the right or left), it’s the political *reality* itself that [*The Joke*] challenges” (26, *emphases original*). Taking the shortcut to easy answers, to one side or the other, is what Kundera calls stupidity, the “*nonthought of received ideas*” (*Art of the Novel* 163, *emphasis original*). Rather than provide axioms or simplistic truths, the novelist instead aims to describe—in the minutest detail—moments, feelings, or ideas that are elusive in their infinite complexity. This principle helps to account for Kundera’s use of the repetition-with-variation form; he returns to the same topics because his previous efforts to explain them fall short. In his definition of the word “definition,” Kundera writes:

If I hope to avoid falling into the slough where everyone thinks he understands everything without understanding anything, not only must I select those terms with utter precision, but I must define and redefine them. . . . A novel is often, it seems to me, nothing but a long quest for some elusive definitions. (*Art of the Novel* 126)

Some of these terms in his novels include “lightness” (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), “youth” and the “lyrical” (*Life is Elsewhere*), and “return” (*Ignorance*), and certainly in his essays the terms include “novel” and “novelist.”

But if Kundera finds his definitions inadequate, imprecise, then what does it mean to understand them? In fact, understanding for him is an open-ended process rather than a conclusive act: “The novel . . . is the territory where no one possesses the truth, neither Anna nor Karenin, but where everyone has the right to be understood, both Anna and Karenin” (*Art of the Novel* 159). Understanding thus appears to involve a certain recognition or empathy that is non-judgmental. If we limit the discussion momentarily to

characters, it means for instance appreciating the motives of a character's actions, not necessarily identifying with the situation—although this is possible—but at least with the feelings underlying it. Kundera expects that readers should then also react to the characters and their situations without moralizing, without coming to a verdict about what or who is right or wrong. For Kundera, then, understanding is humanistic, whereas for Glissant it presents a potential for aggression. Since Glissant's understanding entails appropriation and reduction, he calls for opacity, the right not to be understood (*Poetics of Relation* 189-90). To understand the Other means putting the Other in my own terms, not the terms of the Other, and thus subjecting the Other to my own expectations. Kundera, on the other hand, argues for identification, for finding and defining the thoughts, feelings, and situations that unite humanity, however contingent they might be. The identification should not lead to a value judgment but rather lead me to call into question my own values.

I suggest that we think of the work of world literature as a balancing act between these two types of understanding. One of the bases of the field is a humanistic one, to go beyond mere ethnographic information-gathering about other cultures and to create ties between disparate people. Cultivating those ties can be accomplished through the evocation of empathy, a feeling which emerges out of identification. Your situation may not be the same as mine, but I can empathize with yours because it touches on what Kundera calls the “so-called eternal human problems.” But the danger in indulging too far in this sort of empathy is believing that my empathy has given me a full understanding of you, whereas that “full” understanding is actually Glissant's type of understanding that denies your right to opacity. Furthermore, what I take to be the “so-called eternal human

problems” might actually just be my own problems. That is, what I in my culture consider to be universally human is actually determined by my culture. This is where the situatedness not only of the text but also the approach of to it becomes of vital importance. I suggest here that the example of Kundera can bring to light the reductive potential not only of one-sided readings—for example, from the angle of politics—but also of so-called eternal or universal readings which appeal for a higher calling but upon closer inspection belie their own situatedness in a specific tradition, such as Western humanism. I turn next to the processes by which these approaches become inscribed in textual and cultural practice.

According to translation scholar André Lefevere, who has described the way texts are subjected to their own and other cultural systems, the circulation and reception of texts in a given cultural system does not depend on some ideal of “literary merit,” or what Kundera would call aesthetics. Rather, “issues such as power, ideology, institution, and manipulation” come into play (*Translation, Rewriting* 2). These factors combine to create a number of “constraints” for texts entering a literary system, and it is the process of “rewriting” not “writing” that determines how a text meets or challenges those constraints. Rewriting, for Lefevere, can be broadly defined as the processes—which may include, among other things, translation, reviews, literary criticism, historiography, anthologizing, or editing— that create the “image” of a text in a textual system as opposed to that text’s “reality.” Accordingly, “[w]hen the non-professional readers of literature ... say they have ‘read’ a book, what they mean is that they have a certain image, a certain construct of that book in their heads” (*Translation, Rewriting* 6) which is formed by reading through the rewrites of and around that book. By reading through the

rewrites, the non-professional reader thus reads the “refraction” of the text (“Mother Courage’s Cucumbers” 240-41) and not the text “as such.” Again, according to Lefevere, the rewriting that creates images or refractions of a text is not an arbitrary process; rather, it occurs according to (or against) an ideology (a “certain concept of what the world should be like”) and poetics (“a certain concept of what literature should be like”) current in a literary system (“Why Waste Our Time?” 217). We will see in this chapter how the literary systems of Western Europe and the U.S. rewrote texts by Kundera and his compatriots according to a Cold War ideology that favored political dissidence and relegated aesthetics to the background in Soviet bloc writing. The comment quoted by the interviewer Biron at the beginning of this chapter is one such instance of this type of rewriting. But Kundera’s responses are just as much a form of rewriting that does not present the text “as such” but rather the text refracted through Kundera’s ideology and poetics, which are in turn determined by his own situatedness.

Translation, for fellow scholars like Lawrence Venuti, is a privileged site for this type of rewriting. Venuti argues that the dominant model of translation in the Anglo-American literary system is one that favors “fluency,” in which the highest praise accorded to a translation is that it reads as if it were originally written in the target language: “In this rewriting, a fluent strategy performs a labor of acculturation which domesticates the foreign text, making it intelligible and even familiar to the target-language reader, providing him or her with the narcissistic experience of recognizing his or her own culture in a cultural other” (*Rethinking Translation* 5). Target language readers, then, have the impression that they are actually reading the original—not a translation—and that the “original” shows them a literary world like their own. Since the

target language readers do not *see* the layers of rewriting that have moved the text from source to target language, the process of translation becomes transparent for them, and in fact, the center of Venuti's argument is the invisibility of the translator. If we phrase Venuti's argument in Glissant's terminology, we can say that while a translation might be expected to reveal the opaque differences of an Other culture, an Other language, an Other literature, a fluent translation only reassures readers as to how similar the Other is and how straightforwardly understandable (*compréhensible*) the Other is in the readers' own terms, since the translation speaks to them in their own language, both linguistically and ideologically. Thus Venuti contends that the fluent model of translation enacts an imperialistic, ethnocentric violence on the source text: "By producing the illusion of transparency, a fluent translation masquerades as true semantic equivalence when it in fact inscribes the foreign text with a partial interpretation, partial to English-language values, reducing if not simply excluding the very difference that translation is called on to convey" (*Translator's Invisibility* 21).

From the work of Venuti and Lefevere, we can see that "foreign" texts entering a literary system through translation are thus in a double bind. Not only are they measured against the target culture's norms—such that, for example, forms unknown there might be classified as strange or inferior, or simply be passed over—but also against the target culture's notion of the foreign culture's norms. The result is a reductive refraction of the texts which places them within preconceived constraints dictating what literature should be like and what literature from a particular Other should be like. Thus Frederic Jameson's famous claim that all postcolonial Third World texts are necessarily national allegories (1986). Aijaz Ahmad and Timothy Brennan have reasonably reproached

Jameson for “mak[ing] Third-World literature an important artefact [sic] or record, but an artefact without theoretical importance” (Brennan 37). Brennan finds that politically themed texts from the “Third World” (like those, I argue, from the Cold-War Second World) gain favor with Western critics like Jameson, but only in keeping with “metropolitan tastes and agendas” (38). In the Western literary system, “foreign” authors, especially those from “outside” the West, are thus expected to serve as native informants, although only to corroborate “facts” already circulating in the West. It is important to note that the East figured in the beginning of this chapter in regards to Kundera, that is, Eastern Europe, is not the same as the East figured by Brennan, Ahmad, and most notably Edward Said with his theory of Orientalism. While North America and Western Europe remain steadily in “the West,” Eastern Europe actually becomes a contested middle site, and indeed its Cold War designation as the Second World indicates this. The placement of the former Soviet bloc countries on the cultural map is of grave importance to Kundera because of all that placement involves. I will turn, then, at the end of this chapter to Kundera’s modes of mapping Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Europe, and finally the world. As Vilashini Cooppan has remarked, “any map presents the global as a local utterance, for any attempt to represent ‘the world’ inevitably bespeaks the mapmaker’s own placement” (“World Literature and Global Theory” 13). While Kundera’s map may expose a situatedness that privileges the European tradition, I ultimately argue that if we take his framework and apply it differently, it actually serves as a useful means for provincializing Europe, to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s term, and for recontextualizing and remapping world literature.

Much of the way Kundera maps literature, or rather the novel, comes from the way his work was first understood (in Glissant's sense of the word) in the West, and so we will look first at the construction of that understanding in the Anglo-American literary system. Since my concern is not so much the texts themselves as their refraction and reception, my study centers around the forms of rewriting that frame the translations for the Anglo-American reader. I will thus be dealing with what Gérard Genette calls paratexts, all the texts and figures accompanying or commenting on the object that is the text itself: "the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public" (1). This involves everything from the title and dedication to prefaces to press packages and reviews. Here I focus primarily on introductions and prefaces to the translated texts—be they by the author, the translator, or another writer or critic—and reviews and other articles in four major newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Chicago Tribune*. The brevity of these genres makes them particularly well suited to this study since it encourages a shorthand that plays up the reductive aspect of the rewriting. These various introductions, reviews, and articles act as what Genette calls the "threshold" for the reader deciding whether or not (and how) to "enter" the text. In the case of translations of foreign literature, these paratexts often tell readers, in a limited amount of words, why they should be interested in a text by a particular author from a particular culture. As Carol S. Maier has noted in her study of the reception of Latin American literature in translation, reviews frequently attempt to spark their reader's interest in a foreign text "by focusing almost exclusively on a translation's potential role in English" (248). These paratexts tend to suggest that the role Czechoslovak texts principally had to

play in English was a political one, and it is against this rewriting that Kundera will react with his own forms of rewriting to argue for a broader role not only in English, French, or Czech but in Europe as a whole.

Peddling Dissidence: The reception of Czechoslovak writers in Cold War America

In late 1967 and early 1968, Czechoslovakia enjoyed a relative amount of freedom with respect to other Eastern and Central European communist countries. Writers were at the forefront of the reform movement, and the Writers Union became a forum for dissident points of view. Under the communist party leadership of Alexander Dubček, a number of liberalizing reforms were introduced in 1968, including a relaxation of rules governing the press. Taking advantage of the more tolerant censors, Czechoslovak writers used their texts to criticize the abuses of the government. Their books flew off the shelves. As far as the Soviets were concerned, however, the Prague Spring—as the liberalization movement came to be known—was getting out of hand. During the night of August 20-21, 1968, Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia, initiating the Soviet occupation and the period of “normalization.” Dubček was replaced by Gustáv Husák, and the reforms Dubček had instituted were stripped away. Unsurprisingly, dissident writers were among those most deeply affected by the strict laws of normalization. The Writers Union was disbanded in 1970, and nonconformist writers found it difficult to get even the most innocuous works published.⁴⁵ Dissident texts circulated in the *samizdat* press, which entailed private individuals hand-typing

⁴⁵ For historical accounts of the Prague Spring, see for example: Vladimir V. Kusin, *The Intellectual Origins of the Prague Spring: The Development of Reformist Ideas in Czechoslovakia, 1956-1967*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971; Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. For an enlightening look at primary historical documents, including speeches and statements from writers, see the hefty volume *The Prague Spring: A National Security Archive Documents Reader*, Jaromír Navrátil et al, eds, Mark Kramer et al, trans, Budapest: Central European UP, 1998.

copies distributed in secret.⁴⁶ Some works also found print with the expatriate press Sixty-Eight Publishers, operated in Toronto by émigré writers Josef Škvorecký and Zdena Salivarová. The main audience for Sixty-Eight releases was Czechs living abroad, although copies were also smuggled into Czechoslovakia. While the kinds of texts issued in *samizdat* and expat editions were in extreme demand, the harsh censorship of the period virtually eliminated their public market in Czechoslovakia. In the end, however, it was precisely what made them unpublishable at home in the 1970s and 80s that enabled Czechoslovak dissident writers to gain wider access to foreign markets, namely in North America and Western Europe.

While both sides of the Iron Curtain stockpiled nuclear weapons, they also stockpiled ideologies, presenting the Cold War as a struggle to maintain a certain way of life, the “right” kind of life. The rhetoric of the day promoted a Manichean opposition between “us” and “them” with simplified images about what “we” and “they” were like. The West, for example, characterized itself as a place where free market capitalism and democracy offered everyone equal rights and an equal opportunity to benefit materially. It viewed the communist East, on the other hand, as a land of restricted civil and economic liberties and rampant shortages, a land of show trials and exile to Siberia, a land where the people dreamed of defection to the West. Such an image is what Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius has termed “Slaka.” Taken from the name of a fictitious Eastern European country invented by British novelist Malcolm Bradbury, Slaka here denotes the essentializing Western perception of the undifferentiated countries behind the Iron Curtain, a perception marked by “spatial indeterminacy, unbelongingness, hybridity,

⁴⁶ On the *samizdat* press, see for example H. Gordon Skilling, *Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989.

backwardness, as well as an innate propensity for submission” (29). The poor, beleaguered Slakianians (Eastern Europeans) with unpronounceable names can only bear witness to the miserableness of their situation and had better leave aesthetic concerns to the West. In order to support these images, the West sought out “native informants,” people from inside the Soviet bloc who could testify to the horror of life there, that is, to corroborate the “facts” already in circulation. Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić, for instance, relates an anecdote about an American journalist who asks her about communism but then immediately answers her own question by adding, “I know it was terrible,” leaving Ugrešić to wonder how the journalist “knows” this (*Have a Nice Day* 139).

Any Eastern writer whose work could tell the West what it already “knew” thus had an opportunity for publication, although not without certain constraints. Czech writer Ludvík Vaculík has no illusions about the circulation of his work, as he sums up the situation:

It is almost impossible to tell the world something else than what the world is used to and is curious about. Even the better translators, who are familiar with this fact, translate in such a way that a work’s purpose can be linked to their readers[’] experience. . . . Why did they publish my 1977 *feuilleton* ‘A Cup of Coffee with My Interrogator’ so many times? Because it documented their own opinion about communism! (quoted in Brodská 131)

“A Cup of Coffee...” was one of Vaculík’s most straightforwardly political books, and indeed Second World texts dealing directly with politics had a clear advantage in gaining currency in the First World. The literary merit of the text, therefore, takes a secondary position to its ideological stance, craft subordinated to content. Ugrešić recounts the story of an editor informing her that because she writes “‘pure’ literature,” her work is unpublishable and asks if she has anything about the war, since publishing anything else

at the time would “not be right” “[f]rom a moral standpoint” (*Have a Nice Day* 141). The same American journalist who “knew” communism was terrible also suggests that they “leave boring questions about literature to Western writers. As an East European writer and intellectual [Ugrešić] surely [has] far more interesting things to talk about than literature” (*Have a Nice Day* 139). These anecdotes from Ugrešić reveal reciprocal expectations on the part of the West. Firstly, if you come from an “oppressed” country, then it is your duty to testify about those conditions in your writing. To ignore your country’s plight and write “pure” literature is, in fact, morally reprehensible. The West then recuperates these political statements as justification for its own ideological stance. Secondly, the realm of “pure” literature belongs only to the West because it alone has a free enough social and political system to allow its writers to concentrate on more aesthetic matters. By not discussing politics in their texts, Eastern bloc writers risked not being translated into Western literary systems because they failed to match these expectations.

In order for Eastern bloc writers to meet these expectations and gain currency in the West, they had not only to write what the West considered a politically dissident text but also to live what the West considered the life of a political dissident. This meant that they should either have suffered for their art by remaining a dissident in an oppressed country or suffered in exile in order to have freedom for their art (freedom here, of course, being political rather than artistic freedom). Being imprisoned or having your book banned confirmed that you were doing the “morally responsible” thing. It also confirmed the West’s assumptions that communist governments practice “evil” methods of stripping away their citizens’ rights. The oppressed dissident played into romantic

David-and-Goliath ideals about the struggle of everyday people against a massive, totalitarian machine. Romanticized notions also surrounded writers who left for exile, whom Westerners supposed were very brave and experienced a great deal of pain.

Ugrešić details the way the West pigeonholes the exile according to its own expectations:

The exile is the screen onto which we project our fantasies of exile, and as long as he lets us do this, he is welcome. He is welcome as someone who has *suffered*, as a *victim of the régime*, a *fighter for democracy*, a *lover of freedom* who couldn't stand oppression in the country he left. As soon as he steps out of his stereotype, he becomes undesirable, because he has betrayed our expectations. (*Thank You for Not Reading* 135, emphasis original)

The West values exiles in that they defend the same ideals with which the West identifies itself, namely democracy and freedom. Because exiles must suffer for these ideals, they become a fetish for the West, living symbols of just how important and in need of defense those ideals are. Should exiles “step out of this stereotype,” as Ugrešić puts it, by, for example, not experiencing their immigration as a kind of pain, they lose their symbolic power to reinforce the dominant Western ideology.

When, however, Eastern bloc writers matched all or most of the West's expectations, they could find a receptive market for translations of their books. Dissident Eastern writers served as ideological allies in the West's struggle against its Cold War foe, and the seeming smallness of these writers in the face of the large and looming enemy of the Soviet bloc lent them a quixotic charm. I do not mean here to deny or trivialize the very real oppression of Soviet-style communist rule in countries like Czechoslovakia or the very real danger some writers risked in criticizing that rule. However, these conditions did give them cultural currency that relatively increased the chances for success on the Western book market. This is also not to say that these Eastern bloc texts did not possess other merits that made them “worthy” of translation or critical

accolade, but the fact that they were “dissident” surely played into the rewriting that helped these texts circulate more widely in the Western literary system. I am not making judgments about the “correctness” of their politics, the “quality” of these texts or their translations, or whether or not they “deserve” to be translated. Rather, I argue that the cultural cachet granted dissident writers gave them opportunities for publication in the West that would not necessarily have been available outside the context of the Cold War ideological struggle. It is imperative to note, however, that whether or not texts by Eastern European authors met Western expectations is not merely a function of the texts themselves. What is important is whether these texts were *perceived* as meeting those expectations. Although the reader, according to Venuti, may feel that he or she has a clear view of the text based on the invisibility of the translator—and, we might add, of other rewriters such as editors, critics, scholars, teachers—as Lefevere has demonstrated, the reader actually faces a refraction of the text, multiply mediated by layers of rewriting. With that in mind, I turn next more specifically to forms of rewriting—prefaces, introductions, and reviews—that marketed Czechoslovak Cold War-era writing to the Anglo-American audience according to the understanding, in the Glissantian sense, of Eastern European literature discussed above.

Rewriting begins already at the process of selection. If the selection process favors politically themed texts from Czechoslovakia as an Eastern European nation, then we can certainly understand if readers have the impression that most Czech writing is political in nature. Three years after the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia, English playwright Peter Spafford created a piece of theater called *Interference* that comprised an anthology of short excerpts from various Czechoslovak texts. In his preface to the

published version, Spafford admits the bias that “[m]ost of the writers featured ... have been silenced, prevented from official publishing, or exiled at one time or another” (xiii), but, he goes on to say, such a bias was largely due to circumstances beyond his control.

All the excerpts chosen had been previously translated, and Spafford found:

[T]he general gamut of work by Czechoslovak writers available in English translation naturally reflects the bias of our culture, and what we have chosen to translate on our side of the former Iron Curtain is the story we always wanted to hear: a tale of bad and good, of cruel oppressors and heroic resisters. (xiv)

Indeed, the prefaces and reviews that frame these texts for the reader often highlight the circumstances in which they were written or the political statement they make, frontloading this type of information at the beginning of the piece, even when it is somewhat irrelevant to the text at hand. Thus Kundera’s introduction to his play *Jacques and His Master*—which, its subtitle tells us, is “An Homage to Diderot” (and not Czechoslovakia)—opens, “When in 1968 the Russians occupied my small country, all my books were banned and I suddenly lost all legal means of earning a living” (1).⁴⁷ Similarly, Škvorecký begins the preface to the English translation of his novel *Miss Silver’s Past* with the story of how his first novel *The Cowards* became a “*succès de scandale*” when the party banned it in 1959 (xiii, emphasis original). Such a practice plays up the cultural currency given to dissident writers and immediately prompts the reader to anticipate a dissident text, no matter what its subject matter. That is, the reader expects to be told “truths” about life under communism because the writer has established himself as a credible (because oppressed) native informant.

⁴⁷ The play was written in 1968 in Czech, but first appeared in print in French in 1981 with the preface referred to here. I quote here from the English version, published in 1986. The play did not appear in print in Czech until 1992, after the Velvet Revolution.

Many of the reviews and other newspaper articles go out of their way to demonstrate the oppressed and dissident nature of the biography of the writer in question. Both halves of a certain formulation are important: first, that the writer experienced some kind of persecution at the hands of the Soviets and secondly, that he or she reacted rebelliously to it (for which he or she was probably persecuted again, etc.). Having been censored and later disowned by the communist Czechoslovak government, Kundera met the criteria for a writer who has suffered both artistically and personally. The only proof needed of the dissidence of his writing was the fact that the communists objected to publishing it, although it was certainly not without clear critiques of the contemporary Czechoslovak political situation. Having left his native land after his work was banned, Kundera then also plays for the American media that role of exile described by Ugrešić who “has *suffered*, as a *victim of the régime*, a *fighter for democracy*, a *lover of freedom* who couldn’t stand oppression” (*Thank You for Not Reading* 135, *emphases original*).

Michiko Kakutani’s 1982 *New York Times* profile accordingly introduces Kundera as “A Man Who Cannot Forget,” signifying the melancholy he feels from his separation from Czechoslovakia as well as his continued opposition to the communist system, even though he has left the country (C13). The article emphasizes the fact that the Party banned all of his work and then revoked his citizenship after he immigrated to France, and the pain of Kundera’s exile is indicated by his statement that he was “very sad to leave,” a phrase that also serves as a subheading in the article. In a 1984 interview two years later with Jane Kramer, Kundera shows a keen awareness of—and resistance to—Kramer’s desire to brand him with the label of dissident exile. Early in the interview, Kramer asks Kundera to “describe [him]self,” then returns to the question again later.

When Kundera dodges the question by saying there are “hundreds of motives, hundreds of themes” in his and everyone else’s life and he “[doesn’t] know which is the most important one,” Kramer insists on the centrality of exile and dissidence to his identity: “Certainly the fact that you are a Czech writer living in Paris—an intellectual who dissented and cannot go home—is important” (“No Word for Home” BR47).

Kramer and journalists and reviewers like her cannot refrain from making personal and national histories of communist repression essential to the identity of Czechoslovak writers, and to their art. Reviews of books by Kundera and Vaculík in *The Washington Post* (Carol Eron 1974) and *The Los Angeles Times* (Robert Kirsch 1975), for example, are startlingly similar in the way the reviewers articulate their inability to ignore the circumstances of textual production. Both reviewers refer to Philip Roth’s⁴⁸ admonition in the introduction to Kundera’s *Laughable Loves* that it and Vaculík’s *The Guinea Pigs* deserve to be read for their literary merit and not out of pity for their plights under communism. The very next sentence in each review begins with the word “But.” The reviewers simply cannot help themselves; they feel compelled to read the texts through the prism of communist oppression. Anatole Broyard stands out as a literary reviewer who reproaches his colleagues, and Kundera, for confusing politics with aesthetics. He judges *Laughable Loves*, the book that Eron and Kirsch appraised so favorably, as merely “passable” (“Iron Bedsheets”). In fact, Broyard begins his review by accusing his fellow critics of becoming blinded by the situation of dissident writers from communist countries and overvaluing their work:

⁴⁸ Philip Roth was the general editor of a new series called “Writers from the Other Europe.” *Laughable Loves* and *The Guinea Pigs* were the series’ flagship releases, which involves another degree of consecration in the American market.

We praise them for their moral courage and forgive their literary lapses. Their fiction takes on for us a tension of personal risk and drama that obscures its mediocrity as art. ... In a simple inversion, the censor's disapproval is regarded as a guarantee of quality. There is a naïve assumption that a man would not risk his career or his life to write a bad book. ("Iron Bedsheets")

Ten years later, Broyard had similar criticism for Kundera himself: "One of the irritating assumptions of 'The Joke' is Mr. Kundera's conviction that to be bored or sexually cruel in a totalitarian country is somehow to be heroic, as if any kind of resistance to the regime is a triumph of the human spirit" ("Matter of Purging"). It is key here that despite Broyard's disagreement as to the quality of Kundera's work, he still takes it as a political statement. Critics like Eron and Kirsch find aesthetics irrelevant to the conversation and claim that the value of Kundera's work lies in its political dissidence. For Broyard, aesthetics cannot be set aside.⁴⁹ Finding no literary merit in Kundera's novels, he assumes they are meant to convey an ideological message, and not a very good one at that.

Broyard is in the minority, however, when it comes to valuing politics over aesthetics. What most critics expect first and foremost of dissident Eastern bloc writers is some sort of political commentary, or more specifically, a political and social condemnation of communism. In their articles, the reviewers often foreground the politics of the book in the same way that they foreground the elements of the author's biography that prove he or she is a legitimate dissident. So great are the expectations that

⁴⁹ Broyard's digs at Kundera's writing are numerous and scathing. In regards to *The Farewell Party*: "He explains too much, and for a writer of fiction, he is overfond of philosophy ... [which] pushes the writer's style to the pontifical ...". One story is "an interesting gift in a poorly wrapped parcel," another "has a clumsiness as art that reminds one of the clothing the men wear in his country." Two other stories are "set pieces, mere vehicles for some unremarkable aphorisms about sexual behavior. ... [B]oth stories are little more than pseudo-sophisticated psychologizing thinly disguised as fiction" ("Iron Bedsheets"). As for *The Joke*, its "style [has] a heavy, pedestrian quality. The book is filled with dead lines." In sum: "As far as I'm concerned, Mr. Kundera, who is generally highly praised, is not writing well. His language seems to be somewhere between George Orwell's Newspeak and the querulousness of certain kinds of narcissistic fiction. And there isn't an interesting or convincing character in the book" ("Matter of Purging").

Eastern writers must write about politics that the paratext sometimes functions to rewrite their texts with a politics that is not necessarily there. After a full (and accurate) review of Škvorecký's *The Bass Saxophone* (Maloff 1979), for example, *The New York Times* later published a blurb about the book in its "Editor's Choice" section describing it as "[t]wo novellas about life, politics, and music in communist Czechoslovakia," when in actuality both novellas are set during the German occupation of World War II (BR9). This is not to say that Škvorecký doesn't use the German occupation as a means of talking about the Soviet occupation, but the blurb on its own is hardly accurate. Critics had also come to assume that dissident-exile-par-excellence Kundera could and would only write about politics. They therefore exhibited a degree of creativity in finding the politics in his 1976 English-language release. Saul Maloff closes his review, "'The Farewell Party' is the kind of 'political novel' a cunning, resourceful, gifted writer writes when it is no longer possible to write political novels" (1976), and Elizabeth Pochoda concludes that "*The Farewell Party* attests to the longevity of political oppression in Czechoslovakia by never mentioning it" (cited in Wachtel, 67). Expectations about the necessity of politics to Eastern bloc writers was such that the very absence of politics was rewritten as its presence.⁵⁰ Again in his 1984 interview with Kramer, Kundera expresses his ambivalence about how the Western literary system refracts and rewrites his texts: "If I write a love story, and there are three lines about Stalin in that story, people will talk about the three lines and forget the rest, or read the rest for its political implications or as a metaphor for politics" ("No Word for Home" BR46).

⁵⁰ See Chapter 2 for the case of Dany Laferrière who does actually use the strategy of *not* mentioning the Duvalier dictatorships in Haiti as a means of resisting them.

The reception of Kundera in the West thus depends largely on the Cold War context in which it initially occurred. The first translations of his work in France appeared in 1968 (*The Joke* and *Laughable Loves*), and the English-language translations of these two works were published the following year. The release dates hardly seem accidental. At the time, Czechoslovakia attracted particular attention from the West for 1) its loosening of restrictions on artistic and personal freedoms, culminating in the Prague Spring of 1968, and 2) the abrupt end to this openness on August 20, 1968, with the invasion of Soviet allied troops, the subsequent occupation, and the period of normalization. The received knowledge circulating in the West was that Czechoslovak writers, at least those that mattered, were politically oppressed and suffering, and therefore fated to testify about their oppression and suffering to the world. “Eastern European” writers had currency in the West inasmuch as they corroborated the West’s ideological superiority over the brutish East. This is not to imply, as Broyard does, that Kundera’s books were translated in the West for political reasons alone and that they otherwise possess no literary merit, but his personal and political history surely played a role in his international success. Indeed, the translators and editors of these early published works in English and French intervened heavily in the texts to give them this type of cultural currency. Their rewritings, against Kundera’s wishes, played up the political at the expense of other features of the texts. As Michelle Woods shows in her meticulous study of Milan Kundera’s work in translation, in the first editions of *The Joke* in English, the British and American publishers simply eliminated large portions of the novel that were deemed extraneous to its purported political message, resulting in what Piotr Kuhiwczak deems an “appropriation” of the novel (1990). Despite the cuts, or

perhaps because of them, Audrey C. Foote finds in her 1970 review that *The Joke* is “unusually rich and human for so politically oriented a piece of fiction” and that “the central power of the book is that of an introspective, melancholy, immensely Slavic study of the icy hell of prolonged and arid bitterness” (240).

While the reception of *The Joke* was generally positive, Kundera reacted vehemently against the way it circulated in translation and attempted to rewrite the rewriting of it, asserting what he considers his authorial rights. He describes the translations, in which his novel was both heavily emended and rearranged into chronological order, as having “scarred [him] forever” (*Art of the Novel* 121). At the time of the first publication in English in 1969, he responded with an open letter in the *Times Literary Supplement* comparing the publishers to the “Moscow censors” for the way they had revised the novel to suit the expectations of English readers and “improve the sales” (1259). Kundera claims that he will “[f]or a certain time” refuse “the slightest intervention in my texts, even if this should mean that they will not be published owing to my attitude” (1259), as this was the only power he could exercise. *The Joke* established him as a writer in the Anglo-American market; without its publication he had no influence with which to make demands. For the time being *The Joke* had to remain in its “appropriated” form, but its success granted him some pull in the translation and publication process for subsequent releases (*Life is Elsewhere*, *The Farewell Party*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*)⁵¹ including for example, having a say in who would be chosen as translator. As Woods demonstrates by referring to correspondence between Kundera, his publishers, and translators, the novelist felt continuously forced to make

⁵¹ The first publication dates of these books in French and English are as follows: *La vie est ailleurs* (1973), *Life is Elsewhere* (1974); *La valse aux adieux* (1976), *The Farewell Party* (1976); *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli* (1978), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980).

compromises in order to have his work published, but with the last of these books came enough positive critical and popular attention to assert himself in the translation publishing process (30-38). Kundera had long been published by the prestigious French *maison* Gallimard, but he gained a stronger voice there and also found a trusted ally in Aaron Asher at HarperCollins in the United States. Once established, he set about revising the French and English translations of *The Joke*, *The Farewell Party* (now *The Farewell Waltz*), and *Life is Elsewhere*, consuming much of his time and creative energy for years and resulting in what were deemed “definitive” editions author-ized by Kundera.⁵² Woods, though ultimately sympathetic to Kundera’s revision process, finds a “certain pathological element” to it (66), and the novelist has even described himself in this process, with as much humor as he can muster, as “a sorry figure to himself, a laughable one to others” (*Art of the Novel* 121).

While Kundera maintains that he made these revisions in order to resist certain reductive forms of currency in the West, some critics have accused him of actually playing up to Western expectations and actively courting international success. Ugrešić mentions such a tendency among Eastern European writers to assume the role the West assigned to them: “becoming *the voice of the people* ... I watch them adapting, modelling their own biographies, no longer knowing how much is true, and what is a newly acquired image” (*Have a Nice Day* 140, emphasis original). Allegations of this kind leveled against Kundera have come from colleagues and readers in the country he left behind as well as from the West. Vaculík, for example, a dissident writer who did not emigrate, claimed in 1986 that his colleague Kundera wrote with a “foreign” rather than a

⁵² The first publication dates of the revised editions in French and English are as follows: *The Joke* (1984), *La plaisanterie* (1985); *La valse aux adieux* (1986), *The Farewell Waltz* (1998); *La vie est ailleurs* (1987), *Life is Elsewhere* (1987).

Czech audience in mind and “does not express the real experience of this country” (Diehl G5). The reaction of Czech critics like Vaculík is, of course, also shaped by specific cultural expectations, in this case expectations that Czechs should be writing a certain way for a certain type of “Czech” audience. Milan Jungmann (1988) further argues that Kundera turned his back on the Czech audience by penning *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* with an eye to eroticism and an avoidance of the more complicated aspects of Czech history in order to intentionally increase its international marketability. Bowing to the Western market is also the charge that Allison Stanger (1999) and Caleb Crain (1999) level against Kundera, claiming that he whitewashed *The Joke* in translation by removing references to Soviet collaboration as well as passages that would be considered sexist in the Anglo-American context. The fact that Kundera switched to writing first his essays and then novels in French rather than Czech has also been seen as an opportunistic means to fit more easily into the more highly regarded and more highly remunerated center of the Western literary market. Since he has not granted permission for the translation of any of his French-language novels into Czech, readers in his homeland feel left out, betrayed by Kundera’s devotion to the French and Anglo-American literary systems in preference to their own.

Although I agree that Kundera has acted in self-interest to create an audience for himself in the West, I cannot align myself with critics like Vaculík, Jungmann, Stanger, or Crain who damn him for it, viewing his behavior as merely a shameless search for international celebrity. Detractors such as these approach the matter simplistically and fail to put Kundera’s actions into the larger context of his literary philosophy. Woods

sees rewriting as central to understanding Kundera's literary practice and presents it as a useful way of thinking about the other ways in which he asserts control over his oeuvre:

Kundera argues that rewriting is as creative an act as writing, and that an author has every right to reconsider and re-evaluate his or her work. If some of the writing or some of the work does not come up to the standard of the rest of the work, then it is the author's duty to omit it or rewrite it. (62)

According to Kundera, it is the writer's prerogative to make any changes that he or she likes to achieve the aesthetic aim of the novel. While the critics view revision as whitewashing and base opportunism, Kundera insists the novelist's rewritings are an attempt to perfect the craft. Rewriting thus becomes part of the repetition-with-variation schema: returning to the same theme, idea, or moment in an effort to define it for the reader more precisely. Since the definition is always elusive, rewriting is always possible and even necessary. Woods is right, though, to call attention to a double standard in Kundera's idea of rewriting. Despite the necessity of rewriting, he only allows certain people to practice it:

The author's act of rewriting, for Kundera, is in direct opposition to rewriting enacted upon a writer's work or words by others, because he argues of the dangers of reductive interpretation and manipulation for the ends of rewriters. ... Kundera sees no obstacle in allowing for different versions of the same work to exist across languages as long as he himself is involved in the changes, because of his fear that changes implemented by others are made for the wrong reasons and for manipulation to a certain end. (63)

Even as she points out this double standard, however, Woods's efforts to remain even-handed prevent her from using rewriting in the Lefevrian sense (which she invokes in the introduction to her book) to its greatest potential for evaluating Kundera's rewrites. In the quote above, she allows Kundera's voice to call rewriting by others "manipulation," with all the negative connotations associated with that word. But Lefevre's concept of rewriting always and necessarily involves manipulation to which

he does not assign a negative meaning. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, for Lefevre, all writing and rewriting is performed in relation to an ideology (a “certain concept of what the world should be like”) and a poetics (“a certain concept of what literature should be like”) current in a literary system. And we might add that ideology and poetics are inextricably linked, such that, for example, ideology determines the concept of what role literature plays in the world. Art for art’s sake is not merely a poetical formulation but also an ideological one. An idea like Kundera’s, then, in which rewriting is reserved for the author and his or her illusory quest for aesthetic perfection is a product of an ideology as much as a poetics. In a sense, Kundera has come out of the same Western school of thought as the editor who told Ugrešić he could not publish her work because only Western authors are at liberty to write “pure” literature. Kundera and the editor both value “pure” literature as the Western ideal; the difference is that whereas the editor believes that authors from other cultures should be responding to local political concerns, Kundera believes that “pure” literature is the only standard for all novels. Novels that fall outside of “pure” aesthetic aims fall outside the realm of the true European novel. This idea of pure literature comes, in sum, from Kundera’s situatedness in time and place with its particular ideology and poetics, which he traces in his essays on the history of the novel.

The control Kundera exerts over his translations and other forms of rewriting can be traced to his ideas about the novelist in what he terms the Modern Era, which for him is the moment in history when the individual, rather than the collective, came to the forefront, allowing for the emergence of the author (*Testaments Betrayed* 272). Before that, stories didn’t “belong” to anyone and were adapted freely, but since the time when

Cervantes castigated a rival for writing his own sequel to *Don Quixote*, a precedent for the author's *authority* has been established (*The Curtain* 99-100), one reflected in current copyright law: "If a work of art emanates from an individual and his uniqueness, it is logical that this unique being, the author, should possess all rights over the thing that emanates exclusively from him" (*Testaments Betrayed* 271). Kundera's version of literary history is, of course, marked by a fundamental paradox. While he defends Cervantes's assertion that he is, in Kundera's words, "the sole master of his work; he is his work" (*Testaments Betrayed* 100, emphasis original), Kundera does not seem to care at all that Cervantes mentions several chivalry books without citing their authors because "respect for authors and their rights had not yet become customary" (*Testaments Betrayed* 99). Why should Cervantes suddenly get to decide that his claims to ownership are singular and binding whereas the preceding authors get ignored? Kundera is, in effect, presenting a version of literary history that is both born out of and legitimates the beliefs of the time and place in which he lives, which, according to him, privilege the individual. Later he explains that the author of the Modern Era, rather than having erupted onto the scene with Cervantes, "emerged only gradually over these recent centuries and that in the history of humanity, the era of authors' rights is a fleeting moment, brief as a photoflash" (*Testaments Betrayed* 272). Thus Kundera does not see the author of the Modern Era as a kind of teleological endpoint, but he does consider it a high point from which literary history is now in a pitiable decline.

It is worth taking a critical look at Kundera's narrative of literary history to bring out its situatedness in time and place. Such a move will allow us to see how Kundera's narrative imposes a local model onto world literary history and also how its underlying

ideology mystifies the conditions out of which it arose. First of all, Kundera, with his Modern Era, creates a kind of world clock out of the European clock. Cultures not following the same narrative are treated as not being outside of time, but behind the times. This permits Kundera to make statements such as: "...Rushdie belongs by origin to a Muslim society that, in large part, is still living in the period before the Modern Era" (*Testaments Betrayed* 25). Rather than allowing for the possibility of other time narratives, Kundera instead presents a narrative which chauvinistically characterizes non-European cultures as having to catch up with Europe, which is presented as more advanced.⁵³ Such a narrative is, of course, in the same vein as those used by Europeans to rationalize colonialism as a charitable act of spreading technology and culture in order to help quicken the progress of other civilizations. It is not paradoxical, then, that Kundera identifies writers outside of Europe as those now writing the best European novels, as we shall see in the last section of this chapter. While Europe, for Kundera, has already fallen into postmodern decadence, non-Western cultures lagging behind are just now hitting the moment of the Modern Era.

Furthermore, by considering Europe's Modern Era the most "modern" one, Kundera also favors its tenets and discounts other systems of belief about authorship and authority as retrograde or backward. He relates, for example, how he himself used to be "enchanted by Moravian folk music ... much like those who looked upon such a world with no artistic-property claims as a kind of paradise ..." (*Testaments Betrayed* 271-72).

But he only shares this anecdote to show the error of his ways, subsequently arguing that

⁵³ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) on this point and his argument for a European modern history contemporaneous and coexisting with a subaltern past in non-European cultures. See also *The World Republic of Letters* for Pascale Casanova's concept of a literary Greenwich mean time (where Paris serves as Greenwich), similar to Kundera's mapping of world literature as a periodization with some literatures being not spatially apart from but temporally behind others.

the progression from folk art to art of the Modern Era has led to “Europe’s greatest glory,” i.e. the novel (*Testaments Betrayed* 272). In fact, in support of his argument for authorial rights, Kundera maintains that even folk music was not actually written collectively but had its original composers whose work then sadly slipped out of their control (*Testaments Betrayed* 271). Thus from his location in a culture that privileges the individual and rights of ownership, Kundera writes, or rather rewrites, a literary historiography that presents anonymous works of art almost as orphans stolen from their melancholy creators. Such a move reinforces his privileging of authorial ownership and belittles other systems of belonging as pre-modern in the case of traditional or oral literatures and anti-modern in the case of socialist literature.⁵⁴ The fact that these other systems are collective has implications, however, that are not only aesthetic but also economic.

For Kundera, as already cited above, the uniqueness of an individual gives uniqueness to the work of art he or she creates, and thus that work of art should be uniquely his or hers. This statement then leads into a reflection, which lasts a few pages, on the state of copyright law, with Kundera first explaining how author’s legal rights came to be through the assertion of individual genius and then lamenting the dwindling of those rights in the audiovisual age when, as is the case with films, it is more difficult to identify works of art as the “original expression of a unique individual” (*Testaments Betrayed* 272). Kundera’s connection between individual genius and individual ownership fits neatly into the ideology and poetics reigning in his historical and

⁵⁴ Translation theory scholarship has recently devoted particular attention to the idea of ownership and copyright, questioning the authorial monopoly on the intellectual property of the “original” text and its derivatives. See, for example, Christi A. Merrill’s *Riddles of Belonging: India in Translation and other Tales of Possession* (NY: Fordham UP, 2008), which puts forth the Hindi term *anuvad* for a figure of translation as “telling in turn.”

geographical situation. While he sets the beginning of the Modern Era at Cervantes's proprietary claim over *Don Quixote*, Kundera also argues that copyright law took some time to evolve to support such claims. Indeed, book historians have shown how the Industrial Revolution functioned to tighten restrictions on ownership, both of material and also intellectual property. Sarah Brouillette has discussed the way this change functioned discursively, and the echoes of that discourse are quite evident in Kundera's thinking. According to Brouillette,

Establishing the inspired originality of the literary work—one part of the writer's heroic self-inflation—was an important strategy in authors' efforts to reform copyright law and gain proper compensation for their labour. ... [W]ith the romantic era the modern view of authorship becomes firmly one of individual, original expression. The gradual movement toward such formulations was never only an aesthetic process, but instead accompanied changes in the general structure of the literary marketplace as it became a space of overwhelming commodification. (47)

The claims Kundera makes in response to his critics about his rights as an author should therefore be situated in this framework. While Kundera tries to untie aesthetics from all other considerations (political, economic, etc.), in the larger context of the Modern Era in which he lives, we can see this as a sort of mystification of those other considerations. This is not to condemn Kundera for wanting to earn money from his books, or to suggest, as Vaculík, Jungmann, Stanger, or Crain do, that pleasing readers to sell better is the main motivation for the changes he makes. Rather, a more nuanced view is required that puts the economic concerns of the critics in relation to the aesthetic concerns of Kundera, insisting on the inseparability of ideology and poetics and revealing his mystification of the material as a discursive sign of his times.

The ideology of what he calls the Modern Era in which he lives has therefore shaped Kundera's version of the origins and development of that era at the same time as

it justifies his own position about what the Modern Era consists of as well as, consequently, his position vis-à-vis his own role and rights within that Modern Era.

Kundera is quite adamant when it comes to the author's right to his or her work:

Because what an author creates doesn't belong to his papa, his mama, his nation, or to mankind; it belongs to no one but himself; he can publish it when he wants and if he wants; he can change it, revise it, lengthen it, shorten it, throw it in the toilet and flush it down without the slightest obligation to explain himself to anybody at all. (*The Curtain* 98).

This is, in effect, his response to those like Stanger and Crain who critique him for not merely “restoring” what was distorted in or removed from earlier translations but also introducing his own deletions and revisions, for instance of passages dealing with sexism or communist collaboration, so that the “definitive” versions do not match the “original” ones (Woods 78-80). Kundera has also demanded that some of his earlier work be struck from his bibliography. He longs for a system like that in music in which composers “give opus numbers only to works they see as ‘valid.’ They do not number works written in their immature period, or occasional pieces, or technical exercises” (*Art of the Novel* 147). For this reason, Kundera bemoans the practice of literary scholars who compile archives and critical editions with textual variants, contending that this goes against the wishes of the author, as he makes extremely clear in his own case: “Nowhere in the world nor in any form whatsoever may there occur the publication or reproduction of anything I ever wrote (or will write) except for the books of mine listed in the most recent Gallimard catalog. And no annotated editions. No adaptations.” (*Art of the Novel* 152).⁵⁵ Critics such as Michal Bauer (1998) have condemned Kundera's bibliographical emendations, accusing the author of removing certain texts from his oeuvre—including early engaged

⁵⁵ The text is from the definition of the word “testament” in Kundera's “Sixty-three Words.” It was not added to the French edition until 1995, and thus did not appear in English until the 2000 revised edition of *The Art of the Novel*. (Trans. Linda Asher. NY: Perennial, 2000.)

communist poetry—in order to avoid tarnishing the image created of him in the Western market as a heroic dissident. Kundera maintains, once again, that his choices are motivated by aesthetics, and that the work he essentially wants to erase from his bibliography does not meet his literary standards. Woods further speaks in his favor by arguing that these texts have become incorporated into the later ones through various means: the revision of the text, the return to the same theme, the presence of similar situations, or even the recycling of titles and character names. But again, I argue that we need to qualify Kundera's statements about aesthetic decisions by tempering poetics with ideology. Certainly, as Woods has shown, those older texts are rewritten into newer, we might say more mature or sophisticated works, works intended by Kundera to have a higher aesthetic value. Instead of avoiding the problem of ideology, Kundera might better respond to Bauer by saying that the communist ideology led to too-easy answers in his early texts, rather than open-ended reflections on human experience, the latter being the value by which the Modern Era judges novelistic output.

The Modern Era to which Kundera is so attached is also, in his sad opinion, drawing to a close. To his great consternation, Kundera finds that we have entered an era in which stupidity—that “non-thought of received ideas”—is proliferating uncontrollably. While he places much of the blame for this on the facile formulations of contemporary mass media and the technology disseminating it, Kundera also finds scholars much at fault for their literary interpretations. The academy today, in his opinion, is far too entrenched in restrictive schools of thought, producing professors “for whom art is only a derivative of philosophical and theoretical trends” (*Art of the Novel* 32). Those agents more directly involved in the production of novels—namely editors,

publishers, and translators—are also implicated, as are the reviewers who present the work to the public. For Kundera, one of the most distasteful forms of reductionism in rewriting by scholars and critics are simplistic *roman à clef* interpretations that read novels as figures for the author’s own life. Kundera, in his definition for the word “pseudonym,” thus imagines a utopia in which authors are free from the confines of biography and history; he “dream[s] of a world where writers will be required by law to keep their identities secret and to use pseudonyms” (*Art of the Novel* 148). He consistently bemoans the critical practice of reading an author’s stories in conjunction with his or her own life story, a reductionist move that refuses to let the art speak for itself. “By insisting on decoding him,” Kundera declares, “the Kafkologists killed Kafka” (*Art of the Novel* 132). At the same time, then, as Kundera asserts the right of the author to intervene in the text after publication as much as he or she likes in order to revise or explain, he conversely asserts the author’s right to be left out of the interpretation given by third parties. The seeming openness of Kundera’s interpretive principles as resistant to reduction actually function by closing off interpretation by anyone but the author, whose rights are jealously guarded.

In response to these agents producing what he feels are misunderstandings or reductions of his texts, Kundera insists upon the author’s authority not only in the creation but also in the interpretation and reception of the text. He concurs with Witold Gombrowicz’s response to a reader who admonished him to “not comment on [his] own work! Just write!”: “Gombrowicz replies that he intends to go on explaining himself ‘as much as he can and for as long as he can,’ because a writer who cannot talk about his books is not a ‘complete writer’” (*The Curtain* 78). Kundera’s four collections of essays

certainly serve as a means for him to “explain himself,” and this is a forum in which he can retain control. Whenever possible, however, he refuses to participate in activities where he cannot comfortably keep control of his authority (author-ity). One such case is the interview, a form “that can only lead to the disappearance of the writer: he who is responsible for every one of his words” (*Art of the Novel* 133). Kundera finds his remarks misrepresented by journalists and does not recognize what he said. As he is unwilling to give up this measure of control, since 1985 all “interviews” with Kundera are in fact dialogues that he has scrupulously edited and copyrighted; any other “reported remarks” are nothing but “forgeries” (*Art of the Novel* 134). Another such instance of closing off “misinterpretations” is Kundera’s refusal, after his disappointment with the film version of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, to have any more of his books adapted for the screen. Thus as his success grants him the ability to do so, Kundera increasingly appears to be policing both the production and interpretation of his novels with, as Woods notes, a “pathological” obsession. While he may claim that it is all in the name of understanding, an effort to avoid being *mal compris*, Kundera’s constant interventions risk producing their own type of reduction. The more he persists in explaining his texts to his readers, the closer he gets to making affirmations of Truth regarding their meaning. He reserves for the author the right to create variations in repetition, and forces stupidity upon his reader; that is, the writer gets to do all the thinking while the reader is left with the non-thought of ideas received from the writer.

With the end of the Cold War came a relaxation of the constraints which governed the early reception of Kundera in the West. The relaxation of these constraints combined with the notoriety those constraints at first granted him allowed Kundera a platform from

which to delineate his own conception of the novel and of world literature as such, conceptions which placed him in a privileged position as a figure of authority in hegemonic Western Europe. More recent reviews of his work suggest that Kundera has largely succeeded in his efforts to place himself in a larger European and international context. We do find the odd comment which approaches his current situation with new expectations and reductive national interpretations. Thus Robert Grudin complains in a 1998 review about *Identity*'s "lengthy dyspeptic philosophical maunderings after the French fashion" (BR11), and Kakutani finds that although his humor was "highly subversive" under communism, with "*Slowness* set in France years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Mr. Kundera's humor has turned sour ..." ("Trysts" C17). But such instances—aside from confirming Kundera's place in the West as a *French* writer—are rare. If he has become a Western writer, then Kundera has earned the right to concern himself with aesthetics rather than just politics, and it is the aesthetics of his novels and their ideas that occupy the most space in later reviews of his work.

And yet just as Kundera had carved out a space where interpretation without reference to history, biography, or politics might be possible, these three reared up again in a most dramatic way. In October 2008, the Czech weekly *Respekt* published an article stating that information voluntarily provided by Kundera to the State police in Czechoslovakia in 1950 led to the fourteen-year imprisonment of a man named Miroslav Dvořáček. *Respekt*'s accusation was based on a police report—later proved authentic—that named the writer as the young man who had told authorities that a visitor to his dormitory had left a suitcase in another student's room, resulting in an investigation and the arrest of Dvořáček. Kundera vehemently denied the charges, insisting that not only

did he not go to the police that day but that he had no acquaintance with any of the people involved. The truth of the matter has still not been proven either way. But as Jana Prikryl writes in her excellent account of the *Respekt* article and its aftermath, the sheer amount of debate it generated in the press has perhaps indelibly linked Kundera to the incident:

[T]he best intentions of journalists trying to give Kundera the benefit of the doubt by cleaving to the subjunctive in writing about the allegations have usually collapsed beyond the first wordy sentences: among the many Czech articles that I read on this subject, including those defending Kundera, only a handful stubbornly avoided the conclusiveness of the past tense. Ironically, as more writers joined the scrum of Kundera's defense, the more tightly his name became associated with the episode and the less credible his denial appeared. (1)

Kundera's response did little to clear his name and save his reputation. Having broken his policy not to speak to the media, Kundera sounds harried in the audio of this rare interview.⁵⁶ Although it certainly did nothing to help his case, his reaction is understandable given the importance to Kundera of authority and the autonomy of the novel. The interpretation of his work which he has so painstakingly policed is suddenly spinning once more out of his control.

Aside from the harm to his personal reputation, the *Respekt* article also triggered the type of literary interpretation most despised by Kundera: the *roman à clef* method where the reader tries to match the action and characters in a novel with the life of its author. As Prikryl notes, "Czech journalists spiced their accounts of the affair with scenes from his novels in which characters seem to play according to the 1950 script" (1). The danger here is grave. If the "Kafkologists" killed Kafka, then Kundera's oeuvre is under the same risk from what we might call Kunderologists. The incident threatens to take over Kundera's image completely so that he is remembered not as a "Man Who Cannot

⁵⁶ The sound file is available on the Internet: <http://www.novinky.cz/domaci/151786-video-historici-ukazali-dukazy-kunderova-udani-lzou-rika-spisovatel.html>.

Forget” but as a “Man Who Lied,” with his work considered a covert confession of his ultimately revealed sins. The temptation to read a long-hidden guilt into Kundera’s work is certainly clear, not only in his novels but in his essays, for example when he is considering the reception of writers like Céline or Mayakovsky:

[W]e prefer to say that the great cultural figures tainted with the horrors of our century were *bastards*; but it isn’t so ... If we don’t want to leave this century just as stupid as we entered it, we must abandon the facile moralism of the trial and think about this scandal, think it through to the bottom, even if this should lead us to question anew all our certainties about man as such. (*Testaments Betrayed* 233-34, emphasis original)

The defense he articulates here for his fellow authors is much more eloquent than in his taped interview in his own defense; it is much more complicated and in fact much more novelistic in Kundera’s sense of the term in that it doesn’t aspire to Truths about right and wrong but rather explores the eternal human problems. But in his efforts to maintain authority—especially as he sees the very real possibility of it being stripped away—Kundera’s essayistic writing becomes less novelistic. The repetition-in-variation form becomes more repetition and less variation. The ideas in *Encounter* are basically the same as in the earlier collections without much new or innovative being added; indeed many of the pieces in *Encounter* were originally written in the 1990s, that is, before the publication of *Testaments Betrayed* and *The Curtain*. Rather than responding to new constraints in the aftermath of the *Respekt* article, Kundera gives the reader more of the same again, more “received ideas” from the author.

One noticeable difference in *Encounter*, however, is the amount of space it devotes to literature and other arts from outside of geographical Europe. In the last section of this chapter, I turn to the ways Kundera charts out not a political but a cultural and literary geography. If his concern is the European novel, it is imperative to define

what he means by Europe, especially as I have argued that his situatedness there constructs his entire ideological and poetical philosophy at the same time as that philosophy constructs the Europe from whence it came. Significantly, Kundera's mapping of Europe serves to place himself squarely within its cultural borders, thus challenging his categorization as an Eastern European writer, and all that that implies, so that he is not "reduced to a formula" (Scianna 4). Asserting the prerogative of the author (Eastern European or otherwise) to write and be read beyond biographical or politico-historical context, Kundera centers his efforts to escape what, after Murawska-Muthesius, we might call Slakanian space on two related strategies. He first rejects the label "Eastern European" in favor of "Central European," although as we shall see, such a move mobilizes an exclusionary discourse about East and West. But he ultimately redraws the cultural boundaries of Europe in an inclusionary move that risks falling into Glissant's *compréhension*, with its image of hands taking onto themselves what is not theirs. I will finally propose that, despite the shortcomings in the way Kundera himself applies it, we may use his strategies for mapping literature to a more nuanced effect by shifting the context.

Mapping world contexts

According to Kundera, if we take the cultural and socio-historical perspective, the lands that became Czechoslovakia never belonged to Eastern Europe; it was only the geopolitical act of the Yalta Conference in 1948 that carved up the continent and trapped the Czechs behind the Iron Curtain (*The Curtain* 48). Those countries like Czechoslovakia sacrificed by the West to the Soviets, Kundera maintains, are more properly termed "Central Europe." It is with exasperation that he corrects the great

number of interviewers and journalists who blunder into using the “wrong” adjective “Eastern,” reminding them that Prague lies at the very heart (center) of Europe.

Kundera’s logic holds that a few decades of recent political history cannot reverse a centuries-old historical trajectory:

To say that Prague under the Soviets is Eastern Europe is like saying that France, occupied by the Soviets, would be Eastern Europe. . . . The real drama is that a Western country like Czechoslovakia has been part of a certain history, a certain civilization, for a thousand years, and now, suddenly, it has been torn from its history and christened “The East.” (Kramer BR46)

Yet Kundera’s idea of Europe and the European novel is not so indeterminate as might seem. Kundera’s strategy to place “Central Europe” inside of Europe does not simply mobilize positive comparisons—showing what Central Europe has in common culturally with Western Europe—but also negative ones. That is, he aims to strengthen his case by illustrating the difference between Central Europe and “Eastern Europe.” By insisting on the term Central Europe, Kundera has not done away with Slava; he has simply shifted the border. As Murawska-Muthesius herself writes, “Introducing thus the claim for difference within the body of the Eastern bloc, divided into the raped and the rapist, Kundera did not question, but reproduced, the rules of the discourse” (34).

For Kundera, the East is Russia, as he is quick to inform his interviewers once he sets them straight about his being from *Central* Europe. The centuries-long civilization to which Czechoslovakia belongs is the occidental one characterized by rational humanism, while “far off” Russia—“another world” (*The Curtain* 44)—becomes the depository for the “Slavic spirit, a purely negative notion” (“Quatre-vingt-neuf mots” 113).⁵⁷ “Slavic”

⁵⁷ “Slavic” (“*Slave*”) is one of the “Quatre-vingt-neuf mots” (“Eighty-Nine Words”) Kundera defined in the French journal *Le débat* in response to so many misunderstandings with his translators. The article was reprinted in the collection of essays *L’art du roman* with only seventy-three words, and the English

for Kundera means “inordinate poetization of things, feelings on display, simulated profundities, long looks which claim to say something and accuse you of not knowing what” (“Quatre-vingt-neuf mots” 113), and for him the “Russian universe” is a “hysterical” one (Biron 27). At the same time, its writers like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky play vital roles in the development of the European novel, although Kundera confesses to a personal aversion toward Dostoyevsky because he creates “a universe where ... feelings are promoted to the rank of value and truth” (*Jacques and His Master* 1-2). Citing Solzhenitsyn, he argues that the crucial moment in history comes with Russia’s lack of a Renaissance, leaving it irrational and sentimental (*Jacques and His Master* 3). Elsewhere in Kundera’s writing the divide from the rest of Europe comes much earlier, as Russia is “rooted ... in the ancient past of Byzantium, possesses its own historical problematic, its own architectural look, its own religion (Orthodox), its alphabet (Cyrillic ...) and also its own sort of communism ...” (*The Curtain* 43). While Kundera deplores the fact that Westerners include former Czechoslovakia in the “European Orient” (*The Curtain* 43), that is precisely what he himself does to Russia. He takes part in a type of Orientalism that casts Russia as the foil to the rational humanism of the West. Russia is a dark and mysterious country whose brand of excessive emotion looms as a threat on the Occident’s eastern front.

The threat becomes reality when Soviet tanks roll into Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Kundera hyperbolically describes the occupation as “the violent end of Western culture such as it was conceived at the dawn of the modern age, based on the individual and his reason, on pluralism of thought, and on tolerance. In a small Western country I

translation *The Art of the Novel* includes only sixty-three. I quote here from the original article since “Slavic” is one of the words missing from the French and English book versions.

experienced the end of the West” (*Jacques and His Master* 11). The death of the West is epitomized by the death of the novel, the European genre par excellence. Before invading “Central” Europe, Russia had already managed to kill off the novel within its own borders. According to Kundera, the totalitarian state, which hands the Truth down from on high, is antithetical to the mode of the novel, which asks more existential questions than it does give answers to them. He asserts that the “hundreds and thousands of novels” published in contemporary Russia “add nothing to the conquest of being. They discover no new segment of existence; they only confirm what has already been said,” and they therefore “place themselves *outside* [the history of the novel], or, if you like: they are *novels that come after the history of the novel*” (*Art of the Novel* 14, emphases original). The problem here is that Kundera assumes that all novelists in Russia are writing either for or against the State. If their novels are published, then they must be mere mouthpieces for communism, and if they are circulating clandestinely, then they must be ideological attacks on communism. Kundera imagines dissident literature in Russia as political and not aesthetic dissent. Apparently he feels that to be as “apolitical” and indeterminate as he himself purports to be, a writer had to do what he did and emigrate. Regardless of the 19th-century contributions from Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, by the end of Kundera’s study of the European novel, we can only conclude that Russia no longer belongs there. If, for Kundera, Europe is not so much a place but a mode of thinking and writing, and if it is no longer possible to think and write that way in Russia, then Kundera has essentially removed it from Europe.

As Joseph Brodsky indicates in his scathing response to Kundera’s disgusted characterization in the introduction to *Jacques and His Master* (1-2) of Dostoyevsky as

embodying the sentimental Slavic universe, Kundera has fallen prey in his literary evaluations to historical circumstances (477). His Orientalist representation of Russia arises from the deep emotional pain caused him by the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. But while Kundera's Russian East descends into reductive stereotype, his theorizing of the West that he pits against it proves much more nuanced. As already mentioned, in his collected volumes of essays Kundera traces the centuries-old civilization of Europe as epitomized in the European genre par excellence: the novel. His history does not recount the national histories of the separate European countries in chronological order. Instead, he presents Europe as a supranational cultural collective, and he works and reworks a few novels, authors, and themes in a sort of repetition and variation. According to Kundera, no country has a monopoly on the great novel; rather, innovations appear in different places at different times. The genre begins for him in Italy with Boccaccio, moves to France and Spain with Rabelais and Cervantes, and continues to cross borders and take on new incarnations with authors like Sterne, Fielding, Diderot, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Flaubert, Proust, and Joyce. It is important to note that for Kundera the site of exceptional novel writing in the early twentieth century is Central Europe with Kafka, Musil, Broch, and Gombrowicz whose names, aside from that of Kafka, do not have the same recognizability in Western Europe as the ones in the previous list. His genealogy thus places lesser-known Central European novelists on a par with some of the most "classic" writers in the West, a move which has significant effects for the understanding of both Central Europe and Europe as a whole.

By including the literary output of Central Europe in his history of the European novel, Kundera can prove the adherence of the former region to Europe "in general,"

thereby shifting it west culturally. The texts of Central Europe become part of the Western canon, which is more or less *the* canon, such that Central Europe no longer ranks as a European backwater. That is, Kundera has given evidence that Central Europe shares its cultural history with that most privileged of places, and in so doing, he has positioned himself, as a Central European novelist, within that literary heritage as well. As Kundera presents it, writers like Kafka, Musil, Broch, and Gombrowicz have too frequently been interpreted in relation to their small context, that is, their national context, or even worse the “microscopic” context of their biographies (*The Curtain* 35-36; “Three Contexts” 10), but such interpretations are limiting because “the aesthetic value of a literary work (in other words, what the work has contributed that is new) is fully comprehensible only in the great context, that is, in the world context (or, more precisely, the context of European literature)” (“Three Contexts” 6). I will return to the problematic slippage between Europe and the world later, but for the moment, what is important to note is Kundera’s assertion that the “great context” is necessary to grasp the aesthetic significance of a novel and its novelist. For Kundera, the separate national histories of the novel do not function independently: a Sterne doesn’t emerge without a Rabelais, a Diderot without a Sterne, a Stendhal without a Fielding, a Fielding without a Cervantes, a Joyce without a Flaubert, or a Broch without a Joyce (*The Curtain* 35). In tracing the history of the European novel, Kundera intends to show how the genre crosses borders and benefits from the innovations and new incarnations that its statelessness affords. At the same time, what unites the novels termed “European” is that they are “bound by [a] continuous evolutionary line to the historical enterprise that began with Rabelais and Cervantes” (*Tesatments Betrayed* 28-29).

Kundera's move of placing Central Europe within the Western canon involves more than its simple subsumption, however. Indeed, Kundera's history of the European novel, in which "there are no state borders" (*The Curtain* 61-62) is not one of stasis, but of contact and change, and so the inclusion of these lesser-known Central European novelists in the canon demands a rethinking of the canon and the West itself. The key to the undermining of the West's stability comes with Kundera's formulation of Central Europe as an imaginary whole made up of small nations. Central Europe here comprises a "median" context between the small national and the large global contexts (*The Curtain* 45). Instead of owing its definition to a concrete geopolitical unity, Central Europe has only a "vague and approximate nature," a "unity that was *unintentional*" brought on by a shared historical experience (*The Curtain* 45, emphasis original). The "smallness" of the Central European nations derives precisely from that shared historical experience in which they have continuously fought for their existence against a series of invasions and empires such that they "haven't the comfortable sense of being there always, past and future; they have all, at some point or another in their history, passed through the antechamber of death ... [T]heir very existence *is* a question" (*The Curtain* 192, emphasis original). In this sense, Central Europe gives the lie to the unified hegemony of Europe, both by revealing the imperialist hierarchies of power within Europe itself and by responding to that power with flippant subversion:

The people of Central Europe ... cannot be separated from European History; they cannot exist outside it; they represent the wrong side of this History: its victims and outsiders. It's this disabused view of history that is the source of their culture, of their wisdom, of the "non-serious spirit" that mocks grandeur and glory. ("Kidnapped West" 108-109).

With their survival in constant uncertainty, Central Europeans have come to learn that even the large nations cannot count on their dominance to last forever. Their fragile existence thus provides evidence of “Europe’s vulnerability, all of Europe’s vulnerability ... [A]ll European nations run the risk of becoming small nations and sharing their fate” (“Kidnapped West” 109, emphasis original). Thus Europe, like the Central Europe at its heart, is only imagined; it is not an ontological given.

As such, the latest embodiments of the European novel need not have their origins within geographical Europe. The genealogy of “great” writers mentioned above arrives more recently at Salman Rushdie, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, and Patrick Chamoiseau. Kundera draws links between their writing and that of Europeans, constructing a “silvery bridge,” for example, between the median contexts of Central Europe and Latin America as the “two edges of the West located at its opposite ends; two neglected, abandoned lands, pariah lands; and the two parts of the world most profoundly marked by the traumatizing experience of the Baroque,” leading to “key positions in the evolution of the twentieth-century novel” (*The Curtain* 82-83). Similarly, Kundera finds a close resemblance between Czechoslovakia’s Bohumil Hrabal and Martinique’s Chamoiseau in their eccentric mixing of fantasy and daily life (“Three Contexts” 9). It is toward the Martinicans Chamoiseau and Aimé Césaire and the Haitians René Depestre and Jacques Stephen Alexis that Kundera feels the most direct and personal attraction, and he sees their introduction of oral literature into the novel as one of the most important recent innovations of the genre, albeit one that also relates back to Rabelais.

According to Kundera, what distinguishes the work of these Caribbean writers from the European novelists is the use they make of “*le merveilleux*” or “the

marvelous”—adapted from Rabelais, the surrealists, and traditional oral culture—in the creation of “*le réel merveilleux*” (“marvelous,” or more commonly translated in English as “magical,” realism), and Kundera mentions this term repeatedly in his discussion of their work. The Haitians elaborate on marvelous realism as a counterpoint to socialist realism (*Encounter* 84); Depestre is “a real poet, or to say it the Antillean way, a real master of the marvelous” (*Encounter* 87); the paintings of Martinican Ernest Breleur pass from “the realm of cruelty to the realm (to reuse this catchword) of the marvelous” (*Encounter* 90). In his celebration of the inventive potential of the marvelous in the large context of the European novel, however, Kundera ends up reducing the median context of the Caribbean to a formulaic aesthetic convention, which he himself admits is a “catchword.” Well-intentioned as he might be, Kundera is not unlike the editors and critics of whom Pascale Casanova, in *The World Republic of Letters*, notes the tendency “to create the impression of a group by gathering under a single label authors who had nothing, or very little, in common ... to legitimize the ‘newness’ of a literary project” (180). In such a manner, the center (for Casanova it is Paris, moving toward London) expropriates the work of the periphery to renew its own literary tradition. Not only does Kundera collect Caribbean writers under “the marvelous,” but he also brings together the work of authors as diverse as Rushdie, Márquez, and Chamoiseau under the term “*novel from below the thirty-fifth parallel, the novel of the South*” (*Testaments Betrayed* 30, emphasizes original), which aside from geographical location does not tell us much about the actual writing. These novels, “though a bit foreign to European taste, are the extension of the history of the European novel,” and Kundera indicates their innovative difference by employing the tired metaphor of a gray Europe and the colorful lands

outside of it (*Testaments Betrayed* 31). For Kundera, these excentric literatures offer the “tropicalization” of the novel, as he here makes reference to the character Gibreel Farishta’s desire to “tropicalize” London in Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, which amounts in the list that follows to siestas, exotic flora and fauna, “religious fervor,” “spicier food,” tropical diseases and insects, “dust, noise, a culture of excess” (*Testaments Betrayed* 30-31). The images that Kundera admires for their novelty in the European context are no more than a series of stereotypes. What we get is the exoticization of the novel, the European novel with palm trees.

What is even more troubling than Kundera’s exoticizing the very literature he seeks to incorporate into the history of the European novel is his insistence on the term “European.” While I applaud him for thinking beyond national or even regional contexts, his terminology ends by privileging Europe as the site of “great” novelistic output. As mentioned above, there is a slippage in Kundera’s thinking where “Europe” stands in for the world. Referencing Goethe’s *weltliteratur*, Kundera claims,

[T]he word “world,” in Goethe’s sense of the term, was meant and is still meant to designate that unity of art rooted in the epoque of Modern Times in the space of Europe, a Europe which since then has enlarged its culture beyond its geographic frontiers to the [American] continent. That’s why whoever lives in the house of the “world” novel automatically and naturally inclines toward the enigma of Europe. (*La littérature contre elle-même*, 10)

In this fashion, Kundera establishes an imbalanced relationship between Europe and the rest of the world. The history of the novel according to Kundera occurs as a combination of the two systems of literary circulation put forward by Franco Moretti and Casanova. Fernando Caba Aseguinolaza defines these two systems as “expansion and appropriation” and “integration and assimilation,” respectively (424). That is, in Moretti’s system, culture radiates out from a center; in Casanova, the center co-opts everything coming in.

Cultural artifacts, such as the novel, may undergo some transformation in their contact with the rest of the world, but when, for example, the “tropicalized” novel begins to circulate in the world, it only has value once Europe acknowledges it and incorporates—or rather expropriates—it into the European context.

This system of circulation returns us to Kundera’s framework of large, small and what is variously translated as middle or median contexts. He is not so much interested in describing a historiography but in making evaluative judgments, which according to him can only be made comparatively: “the aesthetic value of a literary work (in other words, what the work has contributed that is new) is fully comprehensible only in the great context, that is, in the world context (or, more precisely, the context of European literature)” (“Three Contexts” 6). Kundera’s slippage between Europe and the world once more comes to the fore here. Aware that some readers might find such a configuration problematic, he attempts to explain himself:

Let’s be more modest and narrow the world to Europe (in the sense that Edmund Husserl understood it: a spiritual unit that transcends the geographical boundaries of Europe to include regions such as the two Americas). We take this approach not because we are Eurocentrists uninterested in other continents, but because only European literature can exist for us, as a self-evident *whole*. German and Chinese literatures, though they may understand one another, do not share a common history, whereas German and Portuguese literatures do. There are *various* European literatures (a banal statement), but there is also a *single* European literature (a statement only seemingly banal). (“Three Contexts” 5, emphasizes original)

That second statement is not even seemingly banal and only reinforces, rather than dissipates, the problem of referring to Europe as the world. On what grounds can Kundera claim a single European literature? Or, by extension, a single European culture? In fact, he is able to do so by the very processes of exclusion and inclusion described above. That is, everything that falls under his definition of European is “European,” and

everything that does not, is not. His Europe is a tautology that allows him to pass it off as “self-evident.” As Aseguinolaza writes, “To co-opt is to appropriate a cultural space, by means of its identification and characterization, and then use it at a later time as a form of self-recognition. In other words, it is a way to incorporate something by recognizing it and using it for one’s own benefit” (419-420).

And yet while Kundera seems to take the wholeness of European culture, as well as its greatness, for granted, he does not take its continued existence for granted. In his definition of the term “Europe,” he explains how European unity used to depend on religion, then culture, but “[n]ow, in our own time, culture is in turn yielding its position. ... And thus the image of European unity slips away into the past. A European: one who is nostalgic for Europe” (*Art of the Novel* 129). Indeed, the notion of Europe has resurged both inside and outside of academia. As the European Union expands politically, issues such as whether or not Turkey belongs to Europe have been raised. The increasing presence of immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Asia has also sparked heated debates such as the one around the ban on burqas in France. These matters are seen as a threat by many, as Aseguinolaza notes, “the world is no longer conceived of as a place to which access is granted through expansion of the European referent, but a place where European identity is in danger” (422). At this moment, it is helpful to read Kundera’s nostalgia for a lost Europe against his very own characterizations of small and large nations. According to him, “a small nation experiences its existence as an eternal ‘to be or not to be,’ as a wager, whereas big nations take their existence for granted” (“Three Contexts” 7). In this sense, small nations are also like the nations in the median context of Central Europe discussed earlier which

“haven’t the comfortable sense of being there always, past and future ... [T]heir very existence *is* a question” (*Testaments Betrayed* 192). These small nations serve as a warning to Europe itself, and Kundera would do well to follow it in his conception of Europe, not just for the future—which he sees as in danger—but for the present and past as well. The greatness in regards to other cultures that he sees as whole and self-evident is as illusory as it is for big nations who, he says, allow themselves to ignore the culture of other nations because their own culture has achieved such widespread recognition: “The literatures of big nations resist the idea of world literature because they themselves have risen to that level” (“Three Contexts” 7). To be more precise, Kundera is here saying that nations like France, by resisting the idea of a “world” literature, resist the idea of “European” literature (since these are for Kundera synonymous). But we can say that Kundera resists the idea of *truly* world literature because his Europe has seemingly “risen to that level.”

What I want to suggest, then, is that we consider Europe not as a large context but as a median one. Certainly the novel is a European genre in origin, for example, but to only view novels in terms of the context of Europe is restrictive. How has the novel changed over time and space? And what of other genres? To look at the novel in this way with Europe as a median context would be similar in approach to Wai Chee Dimock’s idea of genre as system in which she “invoke[s] genre ... as a ... self-obsoleteing system, a provisional set that will always be bent and pulled and stretched by its many subsets” (86). To consider Europe a median context, then, would be to approach the rest of the world in a manner that does not reduce it, as Kundera and Glissant both fear, but to open

it up for evaluation in which it is not always already the apex against which the Other—
West Indian or Eastern European—is measured.

CHAPTER 4

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: Opportunity Knocks Back

In previous chapters, I have examined the circulation of world literature in terms of the work of writers moving from what has traditionally been called the periphery to the center. My case studies of Dany Laferrière and Milan Kundera serve to challenge the very notion of center and periphery, though, by revealing the global literary market as a more complicated network of flows. These two authors, by resituating their work within larger cultural contexts, allow us to push out the boundaries of localized centers. Laferrière asks to be taken as an “American” writer and Kundera as a “European” (see chapters 2 and 3), fighting labels such as “Haitian,” “Czech,” “Caribbean,” or “Eastern European.” The work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, however, could be said to have made the opposite trajectory: from the center back to the periphery. Ngũgĩ's understanding of his identity as a writer stands in stark contrast to that of Laferrière and Kundera. Despite his international renown and decades of living abroad, mostly in the United States, Ngũgĩ strongly identifies culturally and linguistically as a Kenyan writer, and bemoans the fact that he is cut off from his people, and thus his cultural heritage, whereas Kundera and Laferrière dismiss the stereotypical pain of exile. Having broader, more fluid identities has helped the former two authors carve out a place for themselves in the center of world literature, especially in the case of Kundera, who rewrites the history of the novel in order to give himself a privileged place within it. And even though Laferrière circulated for

some time around the so-called cultural peripheries of Quebec, Anglophone Canada, and Haiti, his oeuvre has now been consecrated by a contract at an important Parisian publishing house and a prestigious French literary award.

Ngũgĩ, on the other hand, received his consecration in London at a young age writing in English. He began his literary career seriously in college and published his first play, *The Black Hermit*, in 1963. Three novels followed soon after: *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), released by the British publishing house Heinemann as part of their African Writers Series. Thus Ngũgĩ quite quickly established himself as one of the foremost writers in East Africa at a time when most African literature circulating outside the continent came from West Africa with authors like Chinua Achebe or Wole Soyinka who also write in English.⁵⁸ Since then, he has actively sought to challenge center-centric models of world literature, like that of Pascale Casanova, which place Western cities like Paris or London as cultural arbiters who consecrate the literary output of the periphery, and where the flow of texts occurs mainly along the center-periphery axis. The center in this model disseminates its cultural forms—such as the novel—to the rest of the world, and then expropriates the local manifestations of those forms back into its cultural heritage (see Chapter 3). As the title of Ngũgĩ's essay collection *Moving the Centre* shows, the author is not so much interested in having his writing recognized by the center but in privileging the periphery to make it a new center. He speaks of the “obvious fact” that “there could never be only one centre from which to view the world but that different people in the world had their culture and environment as the centre” (*Moving the Centre* 9). While he draws the

⁵⁸ On the development of the African Writers Series, see Graham Huggan's chapter “African literature and the anthropological exotic” (34-57) in *The Postcolonial Exotic*.

theoretical equivalence between a people and its location in a culture quite clearly, the reality is not so straightforward, as we will see throughout this chapter. Ngũgĩ himself wrote these words when his exile first in the United Kingdom and then the United States had already begun, and where he remains until this day.

The most dramatic way that Ngũgĩ has acted to “move the center” was by declaring in his 1986 collection of essays *Decolonising the Mind* that he would henceforth write only in his native Gĩkũyũ and bid “farewell to the English language as a vehicle for any of my writings” (xiv), including essays: “From now on it is Gĩkũyũ and Kiswahili all the way.” (xiv). This programmatic statement crystalized Ngũgĩ into a figure of the *agent provocateur*. That Anglo-Americans and other English-speaking people even care about Ngũgĩ’s choice to stop using English as an original medium for communication derives from the fact that they already know who he is, that is, that he had a certain currency in the Anglophone world, a reputation first attained as an English-language novelist and playwright. Even during the years he wrote in English, Ngũgĩ had already begun to think about the role and responsibilities of intellectuals in African society and the formation of African literary culture, as can be seen in his early collection of essays *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture, and Politics* (1972). After studying at Makerere University College in Uganda and then at the University of Leeds in Great Britain, Ngũgĩ became a lecturer of English literature at the University of Nairobi back in Kenya. There he put his cultural politics into practice through an earlier act of provocation by calling for the end of the English Department in favor of a Literature Department that would place African literatures at the center of the

syllabus.⁵⁹ Thus before his switch to writing in Gĩkũyũ, Ngũgĩ had already drawn a good deal of attention, both in Africa and abroad, as an important literary figure as well as a militant postcolonial intellectual activist, significantly placed also within institutions of cultural power such as the university.

Even before his declared “farewell” to English in all his work, including his essays, Ngũgĩ had already begun to write his creative work in his native language. A decade earlier he had begun to produce plays in Gĩkũyũ in the context of a collaborative community theatre group and had written his first novel in Gĩkũyũ—on toilet paper—during his year-long detainment by the Kenyan government in 1978. Although an official reason for his detainment was never provided, Ngũgĩ has consistently put forward as the government’s motivation his activities with the Kamiriithu Educational and Cultural Center, where he produced his first creative work in Gĩkũyũ in a collective effort with members of the community: the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want, 1977)*, coauthored with Ngũgĩ wa Mirii. The year 1977 also saw the publication of Ngũgĩ’s last novel written directly in English, *Petals of Blood*, which sharply critiqued the neocolonial regime of Jomo Kenyatta. Ngũgĩ believes it was primarily the Gĩkũyũ-language plays, and their accessibility to a wide lower-class audience, that frightened the government into detaining him without trial. As a figure of the Author oppressed by the State, Ngũgĩ gained a good deal of renown, with articles of support appearing in the Western press and protests held outside the Kenyan embassy in London. Statistical proof of the increased circulation that his detention granted him comes from his longtime publisher in England, James Currey who, in a 1980 letter to his Kenyan counterpart,

⁵⁹ The declaration, “On the Abolition of the English Department,” coauthored with Henry Owuor-Anyuba and Taban lo Liyong can be found in *Homecoming* (145-150).

Henry Chakava, indicates, “It is regrettable but a fact that sales of translations [of his novels] have increased since [Ngũgĩ’s] detention” (47). The Japanese publishers, for example, doubled their advance at the news of his arrest (Currey 44). Like Kundera, then, Ngũgĩ benefitted on the global market from his political and literary oppression. Related to an increase of sales was, of course, an increase in cultural currency and the opportunities it provided Ngũgĩ to act with greater agency on the stage of world literature, much as Kundera does in rewriting the history of the European novel. As Oliver Lovesey has noted, Ngũgĩ’s detention “symbolically authorized him as a spokesperson” (121), but he acts out this role much differently than does Kundera.

Ngũgĩ is able to parlay his own political and literary notoriety to participate in a politico-literary struggle, and the difference with Kundera (see Chapter 3) is striking here. For Kundera, politics has no place in true literature as he champions “the *radical autonomy* of the novel” (*Art of the Novel* 117, emphasis original). He turns against itself the success he achieved from being taken by the West as a political writer, channeling his fame into a platform from which to depoliticize the novel and himself. Ngũgĩ, on the other hand, has unswervingly insisted upon the inevitable relationship between literature and politics, as evidenced by the title of his collection of essays *Writers in Politics*. In the preface to that volume, he makes his position quite clear:

[L]iterature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battle field: the side of the people, or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics? (xvi).

He accordingly places both his literature and the recognition it brings under the service of a political cause, a cause he views not as personal but as the universal cause for all humankind. While the immediate political problem against which Ngũgĩ fights in, for example, *Barrel of a Pen* is the limitation on free speech and other human rights abuses in Kenya, these play into a larger struggle against neocolonialism at large and all forms of oppression, mostly in the form of the class struggle. For Ngũgĩ, history has unfolded as a dialectic relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed; economic, political, and cultural domination will give rise to resistance by the dominated.⁶⁰ During the last two hundred years, colonialism and neocolonialism (in the form of a nationalist bourgeoisie and foreign capital à la Fanon) have functioned as the main forces of oppression, leaving the peasantry of ex-colonized nations dispossessed of their land and the products of their labor.⁶¹

The writer, or more broadly the intellectual, thus for Ngũgĩ has a moral imperative to side with the oppressed, which in his Marxist conception of history can be understood as “the people”: the peasantry and working classes. This is all the more important in the postcolonial context—according to Ngũgĩ, still following Fanon—because it is the people who comprise the repository of the nation’s culture. The upper classes have been contaminated, in a sense, by the culture of the oppressor and thus become alienated from their native culture and language, which they see as inferior, having bought into the racist, ethnocentric philosophy of the West. Writers and other intellectuals, like Ngũgĩ himself, he avows, educated in (neo)colonial school systems or

⁶⁰ See, for example, “Culture in a Crisis: Problems of Creativity and the New World Order” (126-131) in *Writers in Politics*.

⁶¹ Ngũgĩ draws heavily on Frantz Fanon’s “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” in *The Wretched of the Earth* in his discussions of the nationalist bourgeoisie.

abroad in the former colonizing countries, fall prey to this neocolonial bourgeois indoctrination. To fight oppression and create a community, then, Ngũgĩ believes that the writer should not only draw *from* the cultural heritage still located in the people but also address him- or herself *to* them. Literary culture should center itself around the people in its forms, genres, language, subject matter, and audience. Ngũgĩ thus paradoxically made his reputation worldwide through his provocative ideas about privileging not the world audience but the local, “native” one, which puts him in quite a complicated position.

Ngũgĩ’s decision to write in Gĩkũyũ, for example, might be seen as a turning away from the West toward a local, national audience. But when he announces his “farewell to the English language” in *Decolonising the Mind*, he significantly does so in English, which demands some attention on its own accord and as part of the author’s long-standing ambivalent relationship with the Anglo-American literary system. Ngũgĩ revised the essays that comprise *Decolonising the Mind* from lectures he had given at Auckland University, although he had presented earlier versions of the talks at conferences in Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Bayreuth, and London. The essays are preceded in the published book by Ngũgĩ’s English-language preface and introduction, as well as the half-page “Statement” of his plan to give up writing in English. It is debatable whether the main intended audience is African or Western, but it is nonetheless key that Ngũgĩ’s declaration be accessible to the hegemonic Anglo-American literary system because the author is writing as much *against* something (African literature in European languages) as he is *for* something (African literature in African languages). His statement is, in some ways, a “thanks, but no thanks” to the Anglophone literary establishment, but even if he chooses to write in Gĩkũyũ because he considers his primary audience to be

Kenyans, he still feels the need to inform the West about this decision. While his gesture has practical value for Kenyans for whom his work is now accessible, it also has symbolic value in the West as a sign of his privileging another audience; it is that symbolic move of resistance to postcolonial cultural oppression that requires the accessibility of his declaration to those against whom it is levelled. Thus while Ngũgĩ seeks to generate cultural currency for writing in local, or minor, languages instead of global English, that currency still requires the medium of criticism in or translation into English to circulate widely in the field of world literature.

But Ngũgĩ's position is more complicated than simply needing to tell the big kids in the Anglophone literary market that he's going home and taking his ball with him in a language that they can understand. In fact, Ngũgĩ is still interested in playing with the big kids in the global market. How, then, can he balance his privileging of the local with a continued desire to be read outside the Kenyan nation? And how does his reputation as a militant socialist and anti-(neo)colonialist play into such a bargain? As Sarah Brouillette argues,

[In the] postcolonial version [of the Romantic author figure] the ultimate position of mystified esteem may belong to those who never offer their localized texts to the global field of print capitalism to begin with. ... In those instances where writers do seek to attain some measure of self-authorization, where autonomy continues to possess some small (if discredited and destabilized) purchase or appeal, this often derives from the desirability of negotiating a position in relation to the burdens of precisely this incorporation. In fact, the weight of many self-conscious gestures lies here, as writers respond to the idea that there is some essential fault involved in making one's persona available for consumer access within a globalized industry. Where they are denied any claim to one kind of autonomy, they seek to negotiate another. (73)

If Ngũgĩ's self-branding places him resistant to global capitalism as well as forms of cultural prejudices and hierarchies entrenched in both the market and the academy, he

then needs to work out, as Brouillette suggests, a means for that brand to also circulate within the global market and the world literary system without necessarily betraying that brand. Ngũgĩ's position is particularly thorny because of the programmatic nature of his pronouncements and the unabashed utopianism of his vision. He often quotes these lines from Guyanese poet Martin Carter: "I do not sleep to dream, but dream to change the world" (Sander and Lindfors 177). His first steps toward achieving those dreams often involve bold, unrelenting statements—such as his 1986 decision to write only in his native language of Gĩkũyũ. Making such categorical statements, however, frequently involves not being able to uphold them. For example, Ngũgĩ has continued to write his fiction in Gĩkũyũ and then translate it or have it translated into English, but he has since composed essays in English. While Ngũgĩ has been praised for his boldness, he has also been called out on the ways he sometimes contradicts it. These actions might be variously construed as inconsistencies, paradoxes, or at their worst hypocrisy. Apollo Obonyo Amoko sees Ngũgĩ's situation as paradigmatic of the postcolonial moment:

While much of his writing explores the romantic possibility of African restoration and/or postcolonial revolution, a discourse of tragedy and despair seems to pervade his work. He appears to depict postcolonial Africa as a place ripe for restoration and renewal. But he also seems to recognize, often with bitter irony, the sheer impossibility of realizing such intellectual longings. (2)

This mix of hope and hopelessness characterizes, to an extent, Ngũgĩ's own theoretical practice and positioning as a postcolonial intellectual where he both dreams to change the world but realizes he cannot do it, or at least not on the desired scale.

Utopianism may conjure up images of impracticality, but Ngũgĩ is also a materialist, tuned in to the intersections of culture and commerce. Although he trades in a rather different type of cultural currency, he is just as shrewd as Laferrière in capitalizing

on opportunities to reach an audience with a novel or a discourse. In contrast to Laferrière's rock-star image, Ngũgĩ's bold dreamer appears rather pious, but that very image serves as a type of currency that helps put his work into circulation. I do not mean to suggest that Ngũgĩ uses a romanticized image of the postcolonial author and his struggle simply to sell books. There is clearly conviction in his beliefs, and when he does not hold to them exactly, it is not merely cynicism at work. I suggest here that we think of these moments when the dream does not coincide with reality instead as compromise. To what extent, I ask in this chapter, is Ngũgĩ able to compromise with the material conditions of the global market without compromising his ideals? If we look to the Latin etymology of the word, *compromittere*, there is the sense of a mutually agreed upon promise, and a promise is a type of engagement.⁶² I argue that engaging with the forces of the global literary market can still, and in fact must out of necessity, be the realm of politically engaged literature. By this, I do not mean to suggest a necessary evil, a bowing to the logic of unfeeling financial calculations. Compromise is not one-sided. As discussed in Chapter 2, Laferrière wants to sell books, but those books contain subversive formulations of race, national identity, and language. By using English as a language of composition for theoretical writing, by signing contracts with international publishers, by using a position at an American to found a Gĩkũyũ-language journal—in short, by making use of globalized institutions of power—Ngũgĩ, too, is able to reach a wider audience for his own subversive ideas. In so doing, he also pulls those same globalized institutions of power into his project. They fund it, give it cultural weight, disseminate it. Instead of seeing world literature and globalization as ideological opposites, we should

⁶² My thanks to Jennifer Croft for pointing out the etymology of this word.

look instead at the ways they interact and overlap, which interests they share and which they do not.

One first step toward this compromise between world literature and globalization is a re-examination of the way we define and use the term globalization itself. In his essay that opens *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (2006), the latest report on the state of the field of comparative literature as prepared by the American Comparative Literature Association, Haun Saussy declares: “Globalization is Americanization, not in the superficial sense of spreading a uniform consumer culture ... but in the shaping of economic and political decisions on a world scale by the perceived needs of the United States” (25). But as Amitava Kumar pertinently poses in the Introduction to *World Bank Literature*, a book heavily concerned with the relationship between literature and economics: “Is ‘corporatization’ the same as ‘globalization,’ and is ‘globalization’ the same as ‘capitalism’?” (xxix) He goes on to add that later in the book “Doug Henwood ... rightly asks: ‘Why ... do so many people treat globalization itself as the enemy, rather than capitalist and imperialist exploitation?’” (xxix). These critiques prove extremely relevant to my project proposing here of imagining the global as a site for engagement rather than the type of alienation suggested by faceless corporate conglomerates. While capitalism is the dominant economic system of the age, it is not the only one going. Socialism, of which Ngũgĩ has remained a staunch supporter, also aspires to global status in its utopian vision of equal material conditions for all people.

Closing the gap between the world in world literature and the globe in globalization—to use Vilashini Cooppan’s phrase (“World Literature and Global Theory” 24)—means systematically bringing the material and ideological conditions of

globalization into the discussion of how literature circulates across borders. It takes the forces of globalization—which facilitate but also regulate the flow of commodities, information, cultural artifacts, and ideas—as not entirely antagonistic to those of the world literature scholar. It would be naïve to cast world literature as ultimately altruistic and globalization as driven mainly by the profit margin. We saw in Chapter 3 how discourse since the Industrial Revolution has represented the author as an individual genius uninterested in monetary gain at the same time as this same discourse mystifies its own justification for copyright laws that protect the financial interests of authors in their work. While Kundera participates in such a characterization of himself, I suggested in Chapter 2 that Dany Laferrière openly raises the issue of money and the politics of the author being able to live from his or her writing. Ngũgĩ presents an interesting contrast in that his socialist, traditionalist discourse emphasizes the social over the individual function of the author both in terms of literary production and remuneration. In order to do that, however, he often transacts with the agents of globalization. Again, rather than aiming to show the way these transactions compromise his position, I demonstrate that Ngũgĩ makes compromises *with* these agents in such a way as to engage them as well in the contract that binds them both to his utopian goals.

With language as a key component of Ngũgĩ's philosophy of culture, translation logically plays a vital role in his politico-literary project. If he insists upon Gĩkũyũ as the language of composition, translation will be necessary to reach an audience outside of Africa. I want to here posit translation as a form of compromise in the sense I have elaborated on above. Translation engages both the source and target languages and cultures in the production of a text. We might think of this as a transaction between two

currencies. Whereas English, as the global lingua franca, is usually the preferred currency of global literary circulation—just as dollars can be spent all around the globe—Ngũgĩ’s language and translation policies might contribute to a revaluation of other language currencies and give those who transact in them more bargaining power on the global market.

Although Ngũgĩ has practiced and written about translation and holds the directorship of the International Center for Writing and Translation at the University of California Irvine, where he is Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature, he has virtually no status as a translation theorist among translation studies scholars, with whom he hardly seems conversant in his published discussions of the topic. His theory of translation seems to be derived largely from his own practice, as evidenced by his recent article in the *Translation Review*, a short, anecdotal piece in which he makes no reference to other thinkers of translation studies. Here, then, I aim to engage Ngũgĩ’s own articulation and practice of translation, as well as the circulation of those translations, with broader debates in postcolonial and translation studies, showing how his translation philosophy might affect the currency of languages and literatures at the site of local production, in the contested metropolitan centers, and in the globalized localities outside the centers. I first examine how translations *into* Gĩkũyũ function in Ngũgĩ’s project of community-building and Kenyan nationalism. I then look at translations into English from Gĩkũyũ of Ngũgĩ’s novels, asking what difference it makes to the texts themselves, and to their reception in Anglo-America, that they were written first in Gĩkũyũ, as opposed to the earlier English-language novels. Finally I turn from

translation between English and Gĩkũyũ to Ngũgĩ's hopes for increased translation between Gĩkũyũ and other "small" languages.

Compromises in Gĩkũyũ publishing

Ngũgĩ's 1986 declaration in *Decolonising the Mind* proved untenable, and only two pieces were originally penned in Gĩkũyũ of the twenty-one written between 1984 and 1992 in his next collection of essays, *Moving the Centre* (1993). Those two texts are the ones that "give [him] special satisfaction" (*Moving the Centre* xiii), which seems sadly anticlimactic from someone who had pronounced his intention to write everything in Gĩkũyũ. One of the essays, "English, A Language for the World?" was published along with the Gĩkũyũ original, "Kiingeretha: Ruthiomi rwa Thi Yoothe? Kaba Githwairi!" in the fall 1990 issue of the *Yale Journal of Criticism*, where Ngũgĩ was teaching at the time. Since the number of readers of the journal who speak Gĩkũyũ is probably relatively small, the appearance of the essay in the original there takes on rather a symbolic function, that is, to prove that Gĩkũyũ is suitable as a language of scholarship and by extension to prove that Ngũgĩ's larger project of writing everything in Gĩkũyũ is in fact within the realm of possibility, albeit quixotic. In the case of the other essay in *Moving the Centre* originally written in Gĩkũyũ, the African-language version "is still in [Ngũgĩ's] drawer among a good many others" (xiv).

The fact that Ngũgĩ wrote the nineteen other texts in *Moving the Centre* directly in English speaks to the very impractical, idealist nature of this enterprise. These pieces were created for publication in English-language media such as *The Guardian* or for talks delivered in English-language contexts. As Ngũgĩ has so frequently argued when explaining his decision to switch to Gĩkũyũ: "For the African writer, the language he has

chosen has already chosen his audience” (*Moving the Centre* 73). Thus writing a Gĩkũyũ-language version first and then translating (or having someone else translate) the text simply does not make much sense from a pragmatic point of view in terms of time and effort when the Gĩkũyũ version would not be visible or audible to the reader, unless Ngũgĩ were to doggedly insist on facing-page publication or on delivering his speeches in Gĩkũyũ with an interpreter. This is a moment of compromise, where engaging with the global to disseminate his message involves making concessions.

In the preface, Ngũgĩ never directly admits to the failure of this project to write only in Gĩkũyũ, or even makes direct reference to it, speaking only more broadly of his “current involvements in the struggle to move the centre of our literary engagements from European languages to a multiplicity of locations in our languages” (*Moving the Centre* xiv). But he does discuss the difficulties of its realization:

The Gĩkũyũ writing community for instance is largely within Kenya. There are no journals or newspapers in the language inside or outside Kenya. ... This means that those who write in African languages are confronted with a dearth of outlets for publication and therefore platforms for critical debate among those using the languages. They can only publish in translation or else borrow space from European languages journals and both options are clearly not solutions. The situation does not help much in the development of conceptual vocabulary in these languages to cope with modern technology, the sciences and the arts. The growth of writing in African languages will need a community of scholars and readers in those very languages, who will bring into the languages the wealth of literature on modern technology, arts and sciences. For this they need platforms. It is a vicious circle. (*Moving the Centre* xiv)

If Ngũgĩ had not succeeded in fulfilling his vow to write only in Gĩkũyũ, he has at least contributed to overcoming that dearth of outlets for publication by creating and editing the Gĩkũyũ-language scholarly journal *Mutiiri*, founded at New York University in 1994 and continuing today at the University of California Irvine. With the wide range of academic fields represented in *Mutiiri*, Ngũgĩ can produce a positive feedback loop in

opposition to the vicious circle of which he speaks. That is, the authors featured in the journal help to produce that “conceptual vocabulary ... to cope with modern technology, the sciences and the arts” in Gĩkũyũ, and the journal then disseminates this vocabulary, making it available to other Gĩkũyũ speakers who had not managed to express these concepts in that language. This, then, is in opposition to English as the highly favored language of scholarly discourse, not only in the humanities but also in the hard and social sciences. The journal also makes scholarly writing in Gĩkũyũ a possible, even respectable, endeavor, and thus encourages Gĩkũyũ intellectuals not only to make use of the vocabulary it offers but to contribute to the elaboration of the vocabulary themselves. The hoped-for result would be a broadening of scholarly Gĩkũyũ discourse and the creation of additional platforms for its distribution.

Again, despite the ideals embodied by the journal, the actuality of production resulted in a number of compromises, as Simon Gikandi points out. Ngũgĩ has long professed a double interest in “the people,” both as the source of a national language and culture and as the group most committed to forms of resistance against (neo)imperialist oppression. But located as he is in the United States, Ngũgĩ has been to an extent cut off from the people such that “the journal tended to be a forum for representing the cultural disenchantment of a Gĩkũyũ émigré intelligentsia struggling to recover a ‘national’ culture for metropolitan Gĩkũyũ readers distanced from Kenyan concerns” (Gikandi 276). There remains an anxious wish to continue to identify with “the people” instead of “you people,” but from the position of a Western institution of discursive power, maintaining that claim proves difficult, and other concerns surface. Indeed, Gikandi finds that *Mutiiri* was “driven not so much by the concerns of Gĩkũyũ or Kenyan workers and peasants, but

the rhetoric of American identity politics” (276), which seems only logical given the context in which it arose. Ngũgĩ himself argues that culture evolves out of day-to-day life and the struggles of the oppressed against the oppressor. His anxiety about losing his national culture is then perhaps misplaced, since the language of *Mutiiri* emerges not out of the daily struggles of the people in Kenya but out of the discursive and identity struggles of his daily life in the U.S. It is not surprising, then, that Gikandi, also based in the United States, finds “a desire, among [the journal’s] publishers and editors, to both ‘Africanize’ the practice of producing knowledge within the Western academy, but also ‘westernize’ Gĩkũyũ discourses on subjects ranging from love to multiculturalism” (275). It is in *Mutiiri* that the real compromises of Ngũgĩ’s language project, compromises he does not himself acknowledge, surface. While Ngũgĩ posits a naturalized national language, language—in its contact with other languages, in the transactions of translation—does not emerge in a supposedly unadulterated state, even among the people. The language of *Mutiiri*—a Gĩkũyũ born out of life not in Kenya among the people but out of life in the West as one of “you people”—is the eventual compromise between the transactions between Gĩkũyũ and English. This represents a compromise of Ngũgĩ’s ideals only if he continues to insist upon an unmediated national Gĩkũyũ language. But what happened to Gĩkũyũ, and to Western languages, in the creation of a language for *Mutiiri* is indicative of the way Gĩkũyũ has evolved in Kenya itself, transformed by its contacts with other cultures.

The problem of distribution raises issues not only of what language can be published but who publishes it. One of the other areas in which Ngũgĩ has taken criticism for inconsistency is his contracts with non-African publishing houses for his texts,

especially his creative work in Gĩkũyũ. He has most frequently made publishing deals with Heinemann, based in London, which was among the vanguard in bringing African writers to the West and across Africa with its African Writers Series. Again, much of the reasoning behind Ngũgĩ's compromise in this area derives from pragmatism. In the 1970s at least, most of the publishing houses "local" to Kenya were actually branches of international publishing conglomerates (Sander and Lindfors 79); it was not until later that a greater number of truly locally owned publishers fought their way onto the literary scene in Kenya. So until a certain point, finding a quality publisher without ties to neo-imperialist sources of wealth would have proved extremely difficult. Ngũgĩ did look for ways to localize the production and distribution of his work, though. His three one-act plays, *This Time Tomorrow*, were put out under the East Africa Bureau, but Ngũgĩ indicates that he "had nasty experiences in dealing with Kenya-based publishing houses" (Sander and Lindfors 131), noting that when seeking a publisher for *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, one asked him and Ngũgĩ wa Mirii to pay up-front and another pulled the plug on the publication when Ngũgĩ was detained.

Thus Ngũgĩ chose to release even his Gĩkũyũ-language texts with Heinemann, who brought out both the English and Gĩkũyũ editions of *Devil on the Cross*. He is very much aware of the problematic nature of his decision but defends it on a couple of fronts. Firstly, and rather ironically, he notes that non-local publishers may be more inclined and even more suitable to release texts engaged with local political issues because they are less "amenable to state pressure" (Sander and Lindfors 298). So while international publishers are less concerned with the local political situation, and so have less of a stake in engaging in it in any militant way, they are also less vulnerable to the potentially

dangerous elements in the political situation. International publishers could be subject to the same sorts of government reprisals in the form of censorship but need not fear more dangerous, physically harmful politico-literary crackdowns like imprisonment because they are simply not on site, and furthermore the detainment of Western nationals would draw international human rights attention in a way that abuses against local citizens, unfortunately, does not, giving international literary agents a certain degree of immunity. Making the compromise of publishing with an English editor, then, is not necessarily self-serving nor merely practical. It also draws the English editor into a global contract that is not only financial but also political and cultural.

In terms of international attention, Ngũgĩ puts forth an additional line of reasoning for publishing with Heinemann that is worth some analysis:

We live in a world of contradictions and limitations. The point, however, is how we can turn a limitation into an advantage. ... I wanted the standard of production of [*Devil on the Cross* in Gĩkũyũ] to be the same as that of an equivalent novel in the English language. I knew the novel could have been produced in some less sophisticated way, but by the terms of the attitudes we have towards the industrialized world's publishing tradition, it was very important that the production of *Devil on the Cross* in Gĩkũyũ be not one iota less in quality than that of an equivalent novel in the English language. This meant that the publishers had to be prepared to invest in the quality of production I demanded. ... This is what I mean by turning a limitation into an asset. ... (Sander and Lindfors 194, ellipses original)

Here Ngũgĩ draws on his pre-existing relationship with Heinemann as an Anglophone novelist, a relationship which had been mutually beneficial, to obtain the desired level of investment and quality. Ngũgĩ had served as an important component of Heinemann's African Writers Series, and his activist, sometimes controversial stances, such as his call for the abolition of the Nairobi English Department, had a certain amount of currency in the West and attracted attention to his work. Thus Ngũgĩ and Heinemann forged a

reputation together, Ngũgĩ as an African writer of international importance and Heinemann as a publisher on the cutting edge of the “emerging field” of African literature. Ngũgĩ’s past success in English, both in Kenya and abroad, persuaded Heinemann to take the risk of publishing him in a quality Gikũyũ edition as well. The high quality of production demanded by Ngũgĩ serves a rather symbolic function designed to prove to the Kenyan and international audiences alike that Afrophone literature is on a par with Europhone literature. Other African intellectuals, perhaps those “alienated” from their national languages, will see that Afrophone writing brings as much prestige in the African community as does writing in the language of the former colonizer, as will the former colonizers themselves, and the popular audience can feel proud that the local culture has been given such esteemed treatment. The act of writing in Gikũyũ is not enough; the manner in which it is done also plays a crucial role in the way that writing is received.

The investment made by Heinemann paid off: the Gikũyũ edition of *Devil on the Cross* exceeded their sales expectations. The original print run of 5000, intended to last three to five years, proved inadequate after only a month. During the first year, Heinemann eventually printed a total of 15,000 copies, outselling even any of its Anglophone novels in Kenya, and for at least a few years after its release continued to sell around 1000 copies a year, on a par with Kiswahili and English bestsellers (*Decolonising the Mind* 84). Figures like these give Ngũgĩ concrete grounds from which to dispute the assumption that to write in English is to reach a larger audience *within and between* African nations. Certainly literature in English would be accessible to people from a wider range of ethnic groups than literature written in the national language of

only one of those ethnic groups. But all of those people, from whichever ethnic group they came, would by default comprise the educated elite, and thus number among a limited minority of the Kenyan population at large. And, in Ngũgĩ's way of thinking, it is the peasantry who carry culture, who make up both the ideal subject and the ideal reader for a national Kenyan literary culture. Indeed, *Devil on the Cross* attained its widespread commercial success despite the practical problems it faced in reaching a poorer, less urbanized readership. Instead of waiting for the people to come to them, the publisher went to the people with vans serving as "mobile bookshops," and other enterprising individuals would take it upon themselves to buy several copies of the book and resell them in rural areas (*Decolonising the Mind* 84). Even the low level of literacy in the Gĩkũyũ language did not deter *Devil on the Cross* from connecting with its audience. Those who could would read the book aloud to others at home or even in more public readings at work, on public transportation, or in bars, where the appreciative listeners would pay the reader's tab (*Decolonising the Mind* 83). It was with much satisfaction that Ngũgĩ saw the "appropriation" of his piece of literature back into the tradition of orature.

The importance Ngũgĩ placed on producing, publishing, and distributing a quality novel in Gĩkũyũ did not preclude him from concerns about global and local Anglophone audiences for the same book. After completing *Caitani Mutharabaini*, Ngũgĩ felt compelled to do the translation into English as *Devil on the Cross* "to prove and to show that when one writes in an African language, one is not invisible for other communities such as the English-speaking communities" (Sander and Lindfors 407). Elsewhere he writes that he embarked on the English-language translation specifically because he "did not want my non-Gĩkũyũ speakers [in Kenya and Africa] to feel that they had been left

out” (“Translated by the Author” 17). Earlier, under different circumstances, he had had somewhat different plans for translating *Devil on the Cross*. While still composing the Gĩkũyũ version in prison, and with no end to his detention in sight, Ngũgĩ had decided to pass his time by first finishing the novel in Gĩkũyũ by 1978, then, “[i]n line with my new thinking on Kenya’s national languages” to undertake its translation into Swahili in 1979, followed by the English translation in 1980 (*Detained* 98). Once he was released, the Kiswahili version fell out of his plans, or at least out of his hands, since another translator was eventually responsible for *Shetani Msalabani* (1982). The ultimate priority of producing the English version over the Swahili one could largely be explained as a matter of practicality: Ngũgĩ had a long history of writing in English but not much experience writing in Swahili, and so the English translation was significantly easier for him to accomplish. But other reasons bear a much more significant value in relation to the circulation of world literature. Ngũgĩ again needed to prove to other African authors writing in Europhone languages that it is possible to circulate in the large, prestigious Western markets even when the original language of creation is African. By making an English version of the novel accessible, he also manages to keep himself current in world literature and therefore maintain his bargaining power. His announcement that he would only write in Gĩkũyũ made a stir in the West, especially among those interested in postcolonial studies, but should that literature *only* be available in Gĩkũyũ, he would soon fall off the world literature radar.

Translations into Gĩkũyũ and nation building

Pascale Casanova has outlined at length the process by which the rise of vernacular European languages in opposition to Latin, as a hegemonic, pan-European

language, contributed not only to the formation of national literatures but to the formation of the nations to which those literatures belonged.⁶³ Ngũgĩ has explicitly drawn the parallels between this process and his own project in response to critics who find his position of writing in African languages radical: he states that he is not doing anything that Dante didn't do (*Something Torn* 83-84). In addition to creative works written directly in African languages, translation into these same languages is key to Ngũgĩ's project, in the same way as it was for the rise of national languages and literatures in Europe. Casanova highlights the translation of the Bible from Latin into vernacular languages as one of the driving forces behind Latin's fall from grace as the privileged form of written, and especially religious, communication. The stakes were high enough that Bible translators like William Tyndale were put to death for heresy. Centuries later, speakers of what are known as "minor" European languages played out similar efforts at nation building through translation to escape from the smaller empires that had sprung up throughout Europe after the fall of the Holy Roman Empire. Martin Procházka (1997) chronicles one such example in the Czech nationalism movement where Czech speakers translated literature from the major European languages into Czech as evidence of Czech's distinctness and respectability as a literary, and a national, language. For instance, if Shakespeare was fetishized in the Western literary tradition as a genius of language, by "proving" that it was possible to translate Shakespeare into Czech—that Czech could accommodate the genius contained in Shakespeare's English—then the Czech language could appropriate that genius status for itself. The act of building up a national literary language functions to give Czech more currency on the global market and more bargaining power in translational transactions.

⁶³ See for example, "How to 'devour' Latin" (48-57) in *The World Republic of Letters*.

The tendency in European nation-building was for national boundaries to fall along presumed lines of national languages: one language, one nation. Areas of border conflict were often areas with a population speaking a language minor to the nation in which they had ended up, such as the Germanophone Sudetenland in former Czechoslovakia. The existence of separate languages can actually derive from political or ethnic rather than linguistic lines of reasoning, as in the case of the dissolution of Yugoslavia where a presupposition of the difference between Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian, without any major linguistic variance, was mobilized to argue for the formation of separate nation-states. There are, of course, European exceptions to the one language-one nation axiom, such as German being the national language of both Germany and Austria, or the two national languages of French and Flemish in Belgium. And certainly the major European languages have also at best masked, and at worst nearly stamped out, minor languages occupying the same territory, such as Welsh, Scots, and Gaelic in the United Kingdom. But the communities *imagined* in European nationalism, to use Anderson's terminology, are on the whole monolingual. The case in Africa is much more complicated, where the carving up of the continent occurred according to agreements between European colonizers with no basis in the African demographics of language or ethnic groups. As the current African nation-states take their borders more or less from these inherited, arbitrary partitions, the result is that these same nation-states tend to be multilingual, making the process of nation building more linguistically complicated. As Ngũgĩ argues, this gives translation an additional but no less important role to play in nation building.

In many African countries, the language of government, of the “state” in nation-state, is the language of the former colonizer. But Ngũgĩ has maintained that the language of the former colonizer cannot be the language which forms the basis of the national literature nor, in consequence, of the nation itself. That language may be used for the conveniences of communication but not to carry (the national) culture because that language is not associated with the day-to-day struggles of the people nor with their traditions (*Decolonising the Mind* 13-16). Interestingly, although Ngũgĩ does promote the possibilities of Kiswahili as an all-African language that would allow for *communication* between Africans of different ethnic groups without recourse to a European linguistic intermediary, he does not see in Kiswahili the answer to the question of which language should be the national language of Kenya, and for Ngũgĩ, a national language is necessary as a manifestation of cultural solidarity in the face of neoimperialism. Kenya, however, does not have one but rather several national languages. Ngũgĩ makes himself quite plain in correcting an interviewer who refers to the various languages spoken in Kenya as “tribal languages” (Sander and Lindfors 110). In the sense that its territory encompasses several national languages, Kenya is not a nation-state at all but “a multi-national state” (Sander and Lindfors 131):

What makes Kenya is in fact a combination of these nationalities. In the same way, what makes *for* Kenyan culture is in concrete terms a combination of the cultures and languages of all these nationalities. Every language and culture has a right to develop. What I would like to see is a situation in which different cultures and languages begin to talk to one another. (Sander and Lindfors 131)

Ngũgĩ’s project of nation building does thus not revolve around an idea of commonality, at least not a linguistic or cultural commonality, although I will return to

the notion of cultural commonality in a moment. As Raoul J. Granqvist has argued in regards to the writing of Chinua Achebe and other African writers:

Political and ethnic heterogeneity feeds on a communal capacity to “switch” between what are in fact illusory absolutes and convoluted differences. The meeting-place, whether it is the bus or the Nation, does not constitute a constant nor does it offer a safe homecoming. (100)

The ties that bind the Kenyan people together in this case are not related to a tradition they share but are in fact related to relationality and to the way that they share their individual traditions with each other. To be more clear, translation—the process of mediation, of relation—forms the very ties that bind.⁶⁴ Ngũgĩ believes that to make these ties stronger, they need to be as short and direct as possible and therefore not pass through the intermediary of English or Kiswahili (in its all-African status, but not in its national status, since it, too, is one of the national languages). For Ngũgĩ, although the various linguistic and ethnic groups in Kenya do not share pre-colonial traditions, they do have one thing in common: their history of resistance, first to Portuguese and British colonizers and then to the neocolonial national bourgeoisie. In this case, the unity of the Kenyan people does not occur in the relationality among them but in their oppositional relation to an Other that is historically determined. So we can conclude that the unity of the Kenyan people does not exist *as such*, does not exist before a certain historical moment (the arrival of the Portuguese) in which their various linguistic and ethnic groups joined in a common cause of defending their soil from those who would seek to take it, and later of defending themselves from those (the national bourgeoisie and foreign interests) who would seek to exploit them. Without this common point of resistance,

⁶⁴ See the Introduction for a fuller discussion about the mediating role of translation.

Kenyan culture *as such* would fall apart, but in sharing their versions of the struggle with each other through translation, they build the relations that build the nation.

There is another sense in which translation functions in Ngũgĩ's nation-building project which is unique to the neo-colonial situation and to some extent combines the two types of translation already mentioned: translation *from* a dominant, imperialist language to prove the literary (and national) suitability of the target language and translation *between* national languages to increase solidarity. This third type of translation outlined by Ngũgĩ arises from the fact that the languages of the former colonizers occupy a fraught position in the literary output of Africa, the position exactly at which Ngũgĩ made his critical gesture of refusing that language for his creative writing. In the majority of other cases, though, African writers use the former colonizer's language, which, as mentioned before, is also often a state language, such that although their work is created in a dominant, imperialist language, it still takes Africa as a cultural base, or more precisely, one of its cultural bases. Ngũgĩ declines to call such literature African in the truest sense; he insists upon qualifiers such as Afro-European, or in the case of English-language texts, Afro-Saxon. Works written in European languages cannot, strictly speaking, be African because European languages in the African context function only as languages of communication, not as carriers of culture. They do not grow out of the day-to-day life of the people and their resistance struggles, although Ngũgĩ does argue:

Some of the best products of the intellectuals and artists from the communities who have been trained in English draw their strength, their stamina, if you like, from their [national] languages. But what's happening is that the original text is now lost to English. English gains, the language from which they draw loses. (Sander and Lindfors 404)

In response, then, rather, to this loss of cultural resources to the West, Ngũgĩ proposes a sort of repatriation in the form of a program of translation called “the Restoration Project”:

Restoration would mean translating Europhone literature and Europhone intellectual productions back into the languages and cultures from which the writers have drawn. This would help to restore the works to their original languages and cultures—akin to rescuing ‘the original’ mental text from a Europhone exile—as well as to reverse the brain drain by ensuring that the products of the brain drain return to build the original base. (*Something Torn* 126-27)

In a move that seems rather more conciliatory than sincere, Ngũgĩ insists that “we are saying that we are not interfering with those texts as they are, and they are works of genius” and that he is not saying the Afro-European authors *should* write in their national languages (Sander and Lindfors 404). But the implication is clear that their output “belongs” to Africa, and part of the reason is that their texts—the “original mental” versions—are African in the linguistic sense. Ngũgĩ maintains, based on his own experience, that the act of writing in a European language for an African writer requires a process of “mental translation” (“Translated by the Author” 18-20). Even if the first language to hit the page is English, African writers still, in a sense, compose in their national languages—because that is where their cultural heritage is stored—and then make the linguistic and cultural leap into Europhonia. This is Ngũgĩ’s gesture of wresting African literature from a monopoly on the part of the global and insisting upon the local, or rather his version of it, as the prime site of circulation.

Ngũgĩ’s dreams of restoration to a lost “original” prove problematic even on the linguistic level. With his idea of “mental translation” into English, Ngũgĩ implicitly posits writing in Gĩkũyũ as an unmediated form of expression, and yet his own description of

the process of creating his first play and later his first novel in Gĩkũyũ reveal how such an implication is misleading. When narrating the story of how *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*) came into being at the Kamiriithu Educational and Cultural Center, Ngũgĩ says that he “learnt [his] language anew” (*Detained* 76) from the peasants with whom he and Ngũgĩ wa Mirii collaborated. The peasants would point out what they saw as mistakes in Gĩkũyũ usage, such as when a character would speak out of register or social position or would use an unnatural turn of phrase. In his *Detained* prison diaries, Ngũgĩ also mentions turning toward his fellow inmates as well as the warders to gather a wealth of knowledge about Gĩkũyũ vocabulary and oral traditions (*Detained* 9). Indeed, the impetus for writing *Devil on the Cross*, or rather *Caitani Mutharabaini*, was a haranguing from one of the prison guards, which comes without quotation marks at the beginning of a new section in the *Detained* prison diary so that the reader is at first unsure who is speaking. Ngũgĩ devotes an entire paragraph to the guard’s discourse before identifying the speaker, such that his words are lent an added significance and authority:

The trouble with you educated people is that you despise your languages.... You may possess all the book education in the world, but it’s we, ordinary people in tattered clothes with bare feet and blistered hands, who have the real knowledge of things.... You people, even if you follow Europeans to the grave, they will never let you really know their languages. (*Detained* 129)

Ngũgĩ wants to respond by telling the guard about the Kamiriithu project, but knowing that this would put an end to the conversation, he holds himself back, although it is clear that his desire to respond comes from a wish to defend himself, to prove that he is not one of “you people,” the educated elite out of touch with the ordinary people. And yet the accusation still hits home—“his talk has stung me in ways that he will never know”

(*Detained* 130)—and provokes the author into starting his first Gĩkũyũ-language novel that very night.

The words of the guard express Ngũgĩ's own opinions about the African elite's alienation from their national languages and the unsuitability of the former colonizer's language as a means for reaching the people and as a carrier of a national culture. In this construction, the European language is "foreign" to the African, while the national language is "natural." Because of their alienation, African intellectuals must relearn their national languages from their "true" speakers: the people. Thus we see Ngũgĩ's anxious efforts to resituate himself primarily among the local rather than global, among "the people" rather than "you people," despite his education and eventual exile and position in an American university. According to Ngũgĩ, once the African elite begin to make use of their national languages in their intellectual output, they will no longer be required to pass through the step of mental translation and will be able to express themselves without mediation. But the very fact that the national languages must be "relearned" from the peasants means that they are just as mediated a form of expression as the European languages, at least for the African intellectual. Ngũgĩ's own struggles to find the "right" words indicate the "unnaturalness" of writing a novel in Gĩkũyũ.

Even if Ngũgĩ would concede that Gĩkũyũ comprises a mediated language for intellectuals because of their alienation in the form of the neocolonial education system, his system still rests upon an unmediated, natural relationship between the people and the national languages, but again, no such assumption can be made. One of the other problems Ngũgĩ dealt with while writing his first novel in Gĩkũyũ was the lack of a standard Gĩkũyũ orthography. He would often go through several drafts, the words'

slipperiness escaping him as he tried to capture the sense of the language in the modified Roman alphabet used to denote Gĩkũyũ phonetics. Ngũgĩ's commitment to the production of creative, scientific, and technical work in Gĩkũyũ led to his participation in a University of Nairobi project of standardizing Gĩkũyũ orthography, a project which, Brendon Nicholls reminds us, is not without its own colonial legacies (196), since the university is a seat of institutionalized power founded by the colonists.

The efforts of the university to standardize Gĩkũyũ spellings can also be linked to the other groups who first attempted a systematic transcription of the language: European missionaries. Ngũgĩ often acknowledges the contributions made by European missionaries to the development of the written Gĩkũyũ language and in translation into Gĩkũyũ, although these contributions were made through the creation of texts—such as a complete version of the Bible in Gĩkũyũ—motivated by an evangelical desire to convert the Kenyans to Christianity (*Something Torn* 96). These conversion efforts proved highly successful, and Christianity maintains a prominent presence in modern-day Kenya, including among the peasantry, not only in terms of actual religious belief, but also in terms of the culture at large. Although he himself has given up what he admits to having been a once-fervent Christian faith, Ngũgĩ continues to use heavy religious allegory in his fiction because it carries such a high degree of cultural reference—the majority of Ngũgĩ's readers, even those without an education, are going to “get it” if he phrases his argument in the familiar terms of Christian imagery (Sander and Lindfors 142-43). The practice and discourse of Christianity are just one of the cultural legacies of the colonizer that infiltrates even the imagined “natural” relationship between peasant and language. As Nicholls so astutely puts it:

Hence, far from treating the Gĩkũyũ language as a pristine repository of culture or heritage, we should entertain the more likely probability that modern Gĩkũyũ, whether it is spoken by the bourgeoisie or the worker, or indeed the peasant, carries traces of the institutional and epistemological violence of colonialism. If this is the case, then the ‘Gĩkũyũ’ used by Ngũgĩ in *Matigari* or *Devil on the Cross* is not an homogeneous or undifferentiated ‘means of communication and carrier of culture’, nor the founding moment of a community of workers and peasants, but an irredeemably ‘prostituted mother tongue.’ (196)

Language, then, is itself a compromise. Ngũgĩ would like to present national languages as emerging unmediated from “the people,” but they have also, willingly or not, participated in global transactions. The exchange between Gĩkũyũ and other languages, global or national, will leave its mark. In this case, however, Ngũgĩ mystifies the global aspect of Gĩkũyũ in order to prioritize the local and chip away at the more powerful global language of English. He mobilizes in the translation of *Devil on the Cross* into English the local, or national, language of Gĩkũyũ in opposition to the global language of English. To do otherwise might compromise his ideals of a naturalized national language, but it in fact would also serve as a means of emphasizing the compromise between Gĩkũyũ and English. Although English may be present in Gĩkũyũ, even among the working classes, that is not to say that they have not transformed it for their own uses, thus engaging it in their own ways of making meaning. Acknowledging the already-global nature of Gĩkũyũ, in the way it has not remained tied to an essentialized Kenya but has interacted with and been transformed by national and global languages, would help Ngũgĩ avoid accusations of a dogmatism doomed to failure in a globalized world, accusations similar to the ones we will see in regards to his failure to stick to his stated language policy.

Translating into English

John Haynes, an Englishman working in the 1970s and 1980s as a lecturer at Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, claimed just after the release of *Decolonising the*

Mind that “the language question is exaggerated because after all it can be translated” (65). Put another way, we might frame Haynes’s question as: Why does Ngũgĩ make such a fuss about writing in Gĩkũyũ, and then translating into English, when he could just as easily do the opposite? A Gĩkũyũ version would then still be available. The most obvious point that Haynes misses here is the symbolic value of Gĩkũyũ becoming the *primary* language in this literary transaction. Despite the efforts of translation scholars such as Lawrence Venuti who seek to deconstruct the sacrosanct position given to the “original” text and to place translations on equal footing with it, translations are still generally considered secondary or derivative forms of creation. Lori Chamberlain, for example, has demonstrated how this plays up to gendered notions of parentage and plays out juridically in the form of copyright law (322). Writing his novels, plays, or essays in Gĩkũyũ *first* thus confers upon them a certain degree of importance which they would not have if they were “derivative” of an English “original.” Such a power dynamic is only exacerbated by the lopsided status of English and Gĩkũyũ in the world. Writing a novel in English seems completely natural; writing one in Gĩkũyũ does not. To write a Gĩkũyũ-language novel, which, because of Ngũgĩ’s already-achieved fame, will receive international attention is to raise the status of the Gĩkũyũ language itself and to prove that it deserves to be considered an appropriate means for literary expression.

By writing his novels or plays in Gĩkũyũ first, Ngũgĩ makes a symbolic statement not only about the standing of his native language in world literature but also about whom he considers to be his primary audience: a Kenyan local rather than a world audience. Ngũgĩ expresses the notion that he writes first and foremost *for* Gĩkũyũ people, whether or not the text later circulates within other national language groups in Kenya, in

other African nations, or outside of Africa. This is related to his Afrocentric focus in terms of the pedagogy of literature in Kenya. In this sense, he to some extent symbolically casts aside his international fame, or renders it secondary to his politico-literary intentions of forging a national Kenyan culture. At the same time, the gesture is only made visible to the international community by the fact that he has already achieved notoriety on the stage of world literature with his English-language novels, and actually that notoriety only *increased* with the polemic of *Decolonising the Mind*.

Aside from the symbolic value conferred on the Gĩkũyũ language and the Gĩkũyũ people, the problem of whether to write first in Gĩkũyũ or English begs further questions about the texts themselves. Outside of Kenya, readers will generally have access to only one of these languages. If Ngũgĩ himself translates his Gĩkũyũ-language novels into English, does this in some way elide the Gĩkũyũ original for the reader of the English text? Does it make a difference within the actual novels whether the English or Gĩkũyũ version is the translation or the original? Put another way, would an English original look more or less the same as an English-language translation done from a Gĩkũyũ original, and conversely could the same be said of the Gĩkũyũ original and Gĩkũyũ translation from the English original? Does the translated text makes its translatedness known to the reader, and if so, how? That is, is the gesture of insisting on a local language, rather than global English, apparent? Ngũgĩ's notion of mental translation would seem to equate the two types of English versions because in that sense both are actually translations, rather than the text *written* first in English being an original, since the actual "original" exists somewhere in the African author's head.

Interestingly enough, despite the programmatic nature of Ngũgĩ's insistence upon a Gĩkũyũ-language original, his actual translation practice does not bring the Gĩkũyũ original to the fore, does not render it visible. As Venuti has argued, the favored method of translation in the Anglo-American system is one where the translation reads "fluently" so that the Anglophone reader has the impression of reading an original text and not a translation at all. The work of the translator, and of the existence of an alternate-language version, are thus rendered invisible to the target reader. Because the fluent translation functions by eliding not only linguistic but also cultural dissonance that would give itself away as translated-ness, even the source culture becomes, to an extent, invisible, or at least transparent: easily readable in terms the target reader can "understand."⁶⁵ To combat the invisibility of the translator, Venuti favors a "foreignizing" rather than a "domesticating" practice of translation which puts the translatedness of the text into evidence, for example by the retention of cultural or linguistic elements unfamiliar to, or even unreadable by, the target language reader.

Ngũgĩ's project of raising the awareness and appreciation of Gĩkũyũ-language literature on the world stage would seem to assume that a practice of translation not unlike the one posited by Venuti, and yet this is precisely not the case in the second two translations of Ngũgĩ's novels into English. He compares what he sees as the more successful translations of *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow* to the mental translations of the Anglophone novels as well as the English version of *Devil on the Cross*. In the case of the early English novels, Ngũgĩ believes that since Europhone languages can only be languages of communication, not cultural carriers, for Africans, then African writers must "translate" their culture, their way of being in the world, into an idiom that is not proper

⁶⁵ For a discussion of the term "understanding," see Chapter 2.

to it. In some cases, this translation is more explicit than in others, for example, in dialogue. Peasant characters would certainly not be speaking English in reality, but they speak English in an Afro-Saxon novel. According to Ngũgĩ, the author conceives of the dialogue first in his or her native language and then attempts to translate it into English in such a way as to convey the sense that an African language is being spoken (Sander and Lindfors 105). Expressed in English, the reader has access to African culture only in “edited” form (Sander and Lindfors 165). Indeed, Ngũgĩ finds that in trying to create the effect of a character speaking an African language while actually using a European language often has the undesired effect of making the character “sound naïve because some of the writers would try to render the syntax of the African speech directly into English or French or Portuguese” (Sander and Lindfors 207).⁶⁶

What Ngũgĩ faults as well in his first translation of *Devil on the Cross* is the way he has stayed so close to Gĩkũyũ syntax in an effort to give the Anglophone reader the impression of African speech. Later Ngũgĩ will argue that this impression does not matter; what matters is that the “essence” of the text is conveyed (Sander and Lindfors 207), and he praises Wangui wa Goro, the translator of *Matigari* for “avoid[ing] the pitfalls of mental translation and that of making the rhythms and syntax of the original language overly present in the target language. ... In other words, readers could concentrate on their identification with the world of the novel without being tripped through the constant reminder that they were reading a translation” (“Translated by the

⁶⁶ On this phenomenon, see also Talal Asad in regards to ethnographic cultural translation: “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, Berkeley: U of California P, 1986. On the creation in translation of a generic “Third World” voice, see Gayatri Spivak’s “Politics of Translation”: “In the act of wholesale translation into English there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. This happens when all the literature of the Third World gets translated into a sort of with-it translatese, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan” (“Politics of Translation” 400).

Author” 20). When he later works on the translation of *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngũgĩ attempts to follow her lead:

My one determination was that I would not try to make the source language intrude overtly in the target language. I was no longer interested in trying to make readers feel they were reading a text that had been written in another language. If they wanted to authenticate the original language of its composition, they could go to the Gĩkũyũ language original. (“Translated by the Author” 20)

This is about as explicit as Ngũgĩ gets in developing a theory of the praxis of translation. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, despite serving as director of the International Center for Writing and Translation at the University of California Irvine, Ngũgĩ has not written widely about translation, nor has he apparently read widely, since his philosophy derives mostly from his own practice. One of his only written published discussions of translation is a short essay in the journal *Translation Studies* where he draws mostly from his personal experience translating his own work and lays out the idea of mental translation. We might consider an essay such as this an act of resistance against Western forms of knowledge and discourse as it occurs in the Western academy. Indeed, as Rita Kothari and Judy Wakabayashi point out in the introduction to their *Decentering Translation Studies*, ideas originating in Western Europe have long dominated the field, and that they have edited this volume because, “[they] realize [they] too have some unlearning to do” (3). The goal of the book is to bring to light alternate models of translation globally where “[t]ranslators in such settings are not *talking* about the text as a fluid entity, just *doing* it” (4). In terms of translation, fluidity involves a blurring of the dichotomy between a single, authoritative original and the translation. The fluidity of the text is also an idea current in postmodern scholarly discourse, but Kothari and Wakabayashi insist that “[a]lthough these untheorised practices might seem to lend

themselves to postmodernist labels, such a perspective would wrench them out of their local contexts” (4). The point is granted, but certainly also these alternative models of translation—such as seeing the source and target texts not in a unidirectional relationship but as multiple versions of the same story—can gain currency in the Western academy at this moment due to the current height of postmodernism crossed with postcolonialism mobilized to question the grand narratives of modernism. That is, a compromise is at work between the goals of postcolonialism and postmodernism that precipitates engagement in a common aim.

Ngũgĩ’s practice of translation, however, as articulated above, hardly fits with these other postcolonial/postmodernist models of translation. While they deal in the fluidity of the text, he is dealing in its “essence.” Rather than a model of translation alternative to the dominant Western one, his talk of “essence” is a throwback to the foundations of that dominant Western model, Platonic thought.⁶⁷ It is Platonic philosophy, according to Antoine Berman, that results in the now-commonplace dichotomy in translation studies between “spirit and letter, sense and word, content and form, the sensible and the non-sensible” (“Trials of the Foreign” 296). Ngũgĩ’s translation policy thus bears some relation to his language policy, as described by Gikandi, influenced by a Western metaphysical notion of culture in the tradition of Arnold and Leavis: that is, a remnant of Ngũgĩ’s university education. Some close readings of Ngũgĩ’s texts, from his early “mental” translations to the later translations from written Gĩkũyũ originals, may help to elucidate how all this plays out on the textual level.

⁶⁷ See Antoine Berman, “L’essence platonicienne de la traduction,” *Revue d’Esthétique* 12 (1986): 63-73.

Since Ngũgĩ especially mentions the speech of the characters as a place where he before tried to convey the Africanness of the language, I propose to focus my close readings on excerpts of dialogue. I will proceed chronologically through Ngũgĩ's bibliography from an early English text, *A Grain of Wheat*, to what Ngũgĩ considers the less successful translation of *Devil on the Cross*, to the later successful translations of *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow*. Ngũgĩ deplores the double standard where those who study and write about Africa are not expected to have any knowledge of even one African language, whereas no such leniency is given to those who undertake serious study of European culture (Sander and Lindfors 271), and I must count myself among the former group. Nicholls frankly acknowledges the difficulties for the Anglophone critic reading Ngũgĩ's work in translation:

When one reads a translated text in the target language, one must play host to all of the hidden possibilities and limitations at work upon one's reading that the source language makes available in the original. How, after all, might an Anglophone critic ever know whether or not the English translations of *Devil on the Cross*, *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow* are "faithful" to the spirit of the "original" Gĩkũyũ texts? More generally, is any text ever completely capable of fidelity to its intertexts? (194)

With his scare quotes, Nicholls rightly puts into question the ideas of fidelity and original, especially in regards to Ngũgĩ who is often working from more than one version at once, mental or written. Based on the discussion above, I would also add "spirit" of the text to those concepts put into question. According to the paradigm put forth in this dissertation, there is no innate spirit to any text; there is only the currency given the text in the way it circulates. Particularly in the field of world literature, as opposed to comparative literature, that circulation occurs in translation, and the possibilities and limitations of which Nicholls speaks are relevant not only to African texts. Comparatists

have long been anxious about reading and teaching in translation, both guarding their institutional territory as well as guarding themselves from overstepping their expertise. World literature asks scholars not to put those anxieties aside but to channel them into thinking how to interpret and teach texts in translation. Even if we teach only texts for which we can access the original language, this will not be true of all of our students, and so we need to model approaches to translated literature for them if we want them to think critically about what it might mean that the text in front of them has been mediated through more than one language.

In this case, I would like to align myself with Sarah Brouillette's conception of an active and "canny" reader of postcolonial literature, and by extension, I argue world literature, in response to an undifferentiated "market reader" who is always "guilty of exoticizing, aestheticizing, and/or deshistoricizing" (17). Instead of claiming this canniness only for ourselves as scholars, we need also to claim it for our students who may already be and who we hope will continue to be consumers of world literature in the future. It is, nonetheless, our responsibility to help develop this sense of canniness in our students, and the metaphor of compromise proves useful here. What sorts of currencies seem to be involved in the transaction between the two languages? What sorts of negotiations might be involved in the compromise reached between them? What sort of commitment do they seem to be engaged in? As we read world literature, however, there is a further compromise involved: that between ourselves and the text. Our interpretation is its own transaction that eventually settles, however provisionally, on certain terms. We and the text may be trading in different currencies and or the same ones, and these will need to be negotiated. The canny reader will better be able to maneuver these sorts of

transactions. Furthermore, the co-promise present in compromise implies our active engagement with the text and a possible commitment to a larger project or ideal. So as not to leave these metaphors in the abstract, I want next to return to Ngũgĩ's texts to show what a reading of translated world literature as compromise might look like. I specifically want to mobilize such close readings in regards to Ngũgĩ's own ideas about translation with his favoring the "spirit" over the "letter." How does this actually play out textually to the world literature reader of Ngũgĩ's translations?

I have chosen the following passages because of the strong emotions of the characters speaking. These are spontaneous, visceral speech acts and not pre-formulated discourses, and thus we might expect them to be closer to "natural" speech, and to contain less formal, unusual, or poetic constructions. In the passage from *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), originally written in English according to a "mental translation," emotions run high when Mwaura brings a message to Karanja at the library. At that moment, Karanja is occupied by other thoughts, and the sudden appearance of Mwaura upsets him:

His face had turned a shade darker. He tried, with difficulty, to control the tremulous pen in his hand.

"Why don't you people knock at the door before you rush in?" he hissed at the man standing at the door.

"I knocked three times."

"You did not. You always enter as if this was your father's thingira."

"I knocked at this door, here."

"Feebly like a woman? Why can't you knock hard, hard, like a man circumcised?" Karanja raised his voice, and banged he table at the same time, to emphasize every point.

"Ask your mother, when I fucked her—"

"You insult my mother, you—"

"Even now I can do it again, or to your sister. It is they who can tell you that Mwaura is a man circumcised."

Karanja stood up. The two glared at one another. For a minute it looked as if they would fall to blows.

"You say that to me? Is it to me you throw so many insults?" he said with venom. (34-35)

Sections of speech do not fall into modern standard usage. The most obvious examples are the emphatic constructions “It is they who can tell you” and “Is it to me you throw.” The “not-quite-rightness” of these constructions for the Anglo-American reader is intensified by the sentence: “You say that to me?” Even the modifier-noun inversion in “a man circumcised” feels less antiquated or high register since the adjective is rather anatomical than poetical. It doesn’t have quite the same effect, for example, as “hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” The informality or unantiquatedness of the passage is reinforced by “fucked,” and the Gĩkũyũ word “thingara” also helps to place it out of an Anglo context. Here, then, the non-standard constructions may be read as an intrusion of African syntax into the English language, in accordance with Ngũgĩ’s aim of giving the Anglophone reader the sense that the characters are not actually speaking English, and it is also true that the “not-quite-rightness” of some of the constructions call attention to themselves, which for Ngũgĩ could interfere with the message.

The language in the following dialogue from *Devil on the Cross* (1982) also follows fairly standard, everyday usage, aside from another instance of an African proverb:

“Can a simple length of cloth really turn out to be so beautiful?” These were Gaturia’s first words on recovering his speech.

“You mean the cloth is more beautiful than I am? In that case I should take it off at once!” Wariinga said lightheartedly.

“A smooth body is made of perfume oil,” Gaturia replied in the same bantering tone, “but perfume oil is not made out of a beautiful body. *Mke ni nguo Lakini nguo si mke.*”

“Sometimes I feel guilty about decorating my body,” Wariinga said, in a slightly sad voice.

“Why?” Gaturia asked.

“These are not times for decorating our bodies with necklaces and perfume,” Wariinga replied. “These are times for keeping our bodies and minds in a state of readiness.”

“For...?”

“The struggles ahead.”

“Those will come soon enough,” Gatuiria replied promptly. “Today is today. Don’t take off the cloth. The struggle for national cultures is a relevant struggle.” He broke off to sing, and Wariinga joined in. (242, ellipses original)

The untranslated text, apparently in the form of a proverb based on its repetitive structure does present the Anglophone reader with a problem of interpretation in that it is not entirely clear if “*Mke ni nguo. Lakini nguo si mke*” translates directly, that is, restates what has come before in another language or serves as an idiomatic illustration of what has come before. Without knowing to what “*mke*” “*nguo*” or “*lakini*” refer, the Anglophone reader can only guess. The canny reader will ask, at least, what the inclusion of this untranslated text engages in. If it more or less expresses the same sentiment as what comes before, then its inclusion signifies the inadequacy of the English in capturing the sense of the proverb. There is a compromise between the two phrases where the first aims at expressing, however inadequately, the sentiment, and the second aims at making that inadequacy visible as well as privileging the African proverb as a form of expression.

Up to this point, I have been calling this phrase the untranslated or African text rather than the Gĩkũyũ text because it is possible that the phrase also puts into circulation the other forms of linguistic currency operating in Kenya. As a multilinguistic country, it is possible also that Ngũgĩ has left this phrase untranslated to indicate its linguistic difference from the rest of the text; that is, the phrase is in Swahili while the rest of the dialogue would in reality be spoken in Gĩkũyũ. Other than this moment, what particularly stands out in this passage is not the Africanness of the speakers’ constructions but their reliance on Marxist or Fanonian discourse. A compromise has thus been reached between local Kenyan discourse and global Marxist discourse to engage in the same project of

politico-literary resistance. The overriding “essence” of the text, if one were to be identified, is a revolutionary one.

In the following passage from *Matigari* (1987), too, the mood is revolutionary, but the use of language owes less to Marxist theory than it does to idiomatic English:

“Then he said to them: You breed of parasites! Give back the keys to these houses and these lands which you took away from the people!”

“Say that again! What did he actually say? That the whole clan of white and black parasites must *do what?*”

“Give the stolen wealth back to the owners!”

“That is good. Serves the imperialists and their servants right! They have really milked us dry. Yesterday it was the imperialist settlers and their servants. Today it is the same. On the plantations, in the factories, it is still the same duo. The imperialist and his servant. When will we, the family of those who toil, come into our own?”

“That is what Matigari ma Njiruungi was saying: Imperialist foreigners and their servants out! This country has its owners.”

“He really told them the truth.”

“Absolutely.”

“Oh, yes. The real hidden truth.”

“Yes, I have always said it: Where will these sell-outs go when the freedom fighters return, roaring like lions to the tune, ‘Patriots here! Sell-outs against the wall!’?” (78-79)

Unlike the “not-quite-rightness” of the mental translation of Gikũyũ in *A Grain of Wheat*, Wangui wa Goro has plainly favored colloquial English turns of phrase: serves them right, milked us dry, come into our own, sell-outs, against the wall. The last phrase, somewhat disturbingly, conjures up distinctly European brands of execution by firing squad. There is a less technically worded reference to Marxist revolution in “Give the stolen wealth back to the owners!” as well as reference to another Western discursive tradition—that of Christianity—in the first sentence, which recalls the Biblical episode of Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple. The text thus puts into evidence the compromises, again, between Kenyan culture as represented by the people and Western

discourses, which as already discussed, have been interacting with the local language in Kenya long before the current global age.

Despite the abundance of English idiom and Western references, however, the text still comes across as “not-quite-right” in English, largely because of the complete lack of contractions. That is, the syntax is not unusual and thus does not seem to be putting into circulation Gĩkũyũ sentence structure and thus pointing toward the fact that the characters are actually speaking Gĩkũyũ at this moment. The effect ends up being similar to what Ngũgĩ describes with naïve-sounding characters in the process of mental translation: the reader has the impression that the peasant farm workers in this scene are actually not quite native speakers of the language they are speaking. Instead of giving the sense through English that these characters are speaking Gĩkũyũ, one rather gets the sense that the characters are non-native speakers of English using a colloquial yet stilted form of it. In this case, the currency of the Gĩkũyũ in the transaction is largely elided, leaving only a sense of an imperfectly assimilated global English of the characters in conversation with a “standard” or “native” English of the reader.

Ngũgĩ does a better job in *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) of avoiding the language calling attention to itself by its “not-quite-rightness”:

“Why are you calling me so early, Titus?” Sikiokuu asked jovially.
“I want permission. Now.”
“For what?”
“I’m not in the mood to play games!”
“What are you talking about?”
“I need to beat my wife. Otherwise anger will choke me to death.”
“Why? Did you find another man topping her?”
“No. It is not that. Please allow me.”
“Titus! *What are you talking about?*”
“You told me not to beat my wife without first consulting you.”

“*Oh, yes, of course,*” Sikiokuu said vaguely. Then he recalled the famous photographs and their role in the confessions. “Did you quarrel about those photos?” Sikiokuu asked, now alarmed.

“No, *but . . .*”

“Then don’t you think about it, Titus. Leave her alone. Or better, fuck her instead of fucking up matters of state security. You are to uncover her connections to the subversives; patience, my brother. Don’t rush into anything you’ll regret. Better wait for the return of the Ruler and that arrogant enemy of the State, Machokali. Fortunately, you don’t have long to wait . . .” (425, ellipses original)

At least the use of contractions is much more regularized and natural in this passage.

Sikiokuu also resorts to an extremely colloquial play on words in “fucking her” and “fucking up matters.” In general, the language use in this passage calls less attention to itself in terms of “not-quite-rightness” that would suggest either Gīkūyū speech or non-native English speakers. However, the English is still outside of what we might call “standard” in that there are frequent shifts in register: from the colloquial “not being in the mood to play games,” to the more poetic “anger will choke me to death,” to the more antiquated colloquialism of “topping,” to the more formal “quarrel,” to the modern slang in the play on “fuck.” This suggests not so much a sense of translatedness but a baroque use of language in line with certain forms of postmodern writing, postcolonial and otherwise, that emphasize the heterogeneity of language.

So Ngūgĩ may have actually achieved his goal of not having the source language “intrude overtly” on the target text, but the currency instead here is one of the postmodern baroque with its virtuoso hybridity and absurdity. It seems fitting that this type of currency should be put into circulation in a text that deals explicitly with globalization and the compromises enacted by the encounter of peoples, technologies, finances, and discourses across the world. This is also a text in which Ngūgĩ worked back and forth simultaneously between the Gīkūyū and English versions, creating a rupture with his idea

of an original Gĩkũyũ text in his head. While Ngũgĩ's politico-literary project of resistance to neocolonialism remains, his compromises with the global agents working both for and against it have been made apparent in the shift in the way he puts that engagement into circulation.

Translating between minor languages

While up to now I have primarily focused on translation between English and Gĩkũyũ, and briefly between African national languages, translation plays another major role in Ngũgĩ's politico-literary project. For some years, and particularly as Director of the International Center for Writing and Translation, he has advocated for cooperation and inter-translation among the underdeveloped nations of Africa, Asia, and South America, to which he gives the acronym AASA. For Ngũgĩ, "translation is the language of languages, a language through which all languages can talk to one another" (*Something Torn* 96), and in the context of AASA nations, such communication is particularly important as a source of cooperation in a collectivized struggle against neoimperialist oppression. As Nicholls writes, "In Ngũgĩ's view, polycentric translation is the cultural corollary to the lateral distribution of global power and wealth" (197). Such a project is not without very real practical problems, the main one being the need for individuals with sufficient knowledge in both the target and source languages. For speakers of minor languages, the second language (often the language of education) tends to be one of the dominant European languages, most likely that of the former colonizer in ex-colonies. Learning one of these languages serves a definite pragmatic purpose as it offers economic and social opportunities. Minor languages simply do not travel in the

same way, so to find a qualified translator for a minor language among the population of another minor language would prove, in most cases, extremely difficult.

One way to avoid this difficulty is to work through a third, intermediary language such as English. While Ngũgĩ sees the value in this “enabling” function of English for purely practical reasons (Sander and Lindfors 405-407), he nonetheless now insists that all translations of his work must be done from the Gĩkũyũ original and not via the English translation. He suggests that the collaboration of people with expertise in either the source or target languages and literary conventions could be used to meet this demand (Sander and Lindfors 271). Ngũgĩ’s ultimate goal in such a requirement is the deconstruction of language hierarchies that place European languages in a privileged position. In an interview with fellow postcolonial scholar Harish Trivedi, Ngũgĩ insists that at the International Center for Writing and Translation, translation is treated “as a conversation, and a conversation assumes equality,” although he admits that under the current conditions, this can only be “an idea or a possibility” (Sander and Lindfors 405). The ideal for Ngũgĩ would be a conversation not merely among dominant languages or even between marginalized and dominant languages but a “multilateral or multi-sided” conversation that would also occur among marginalized languages. As Trivedi points out, the very means by which Ngũgĩ intervenes in the discourse of translation, his directorship at the Center, is institutionalized at the center of the most powerful cultural imperialist nation of the moment (Sander and Lindfors 412). Ngũgĩ acknowledges this as yet one more of the many paradoxes—like publishing his African-language novels with European presses—to which the resistance movement must submit.

World literature itself remains a paradox with its institutional setting largely consigned to the United States, despite the inroads it has made into universities in other nations, including those where English is not the major language. The current state of affairs is a compromise before a truly global world literature can be, if not achieved, at least approached. While the discourse of world literature idealizes the cosmopolitan subject and the free movement of texts and ideas, borders are in many ways getting tighter in the global era rather than more open because the global era is also, as Djelal Kadir indicates, “an age of terrorism.” He sees the geopolitical situation reflected in the work of the humanities:

What, in other words, is the ratio of comparatistic activity between the United States of America and the twenty-seven countries on the planet whose citizens are exempted from the biometric regime of fingerprinting and racial and ethnic profiling, on the one hand, and the level of comparatistic focus and activity between the United States and the rest of the planet’s countries whose citizens are subject to such management, on the other hand? (72)

Kadir further elaborates that the flow outward from the metropolitan centers is just as uneven as the flow inward. Even the idea itself of world literature is one of the “envisaged and formative constructs unimpeded in their penetration and diffusion ... to arrive at what we deem to be our periphery” (73).

Indeed, world literature as a field is largely based in the United States, as well as Canada, Great Britain, and Australia. Not only is English the language of instruction, discussion, and scholarship, then, but it also the language of reading, since world literature as a discipline generally takes up global Anglophone writing, such as Ngũgĩ’s early English-language novels, or texts in translation, such as his later works. Both Ngũgĩ’s fiction and essays have also been anthologized in world literature readers.

Anthologies of world literature, such as those by Bedford, Norton, and Longman, put into evidence the intersection of academia and the market in that they disseminate a variety of short texts by becoming a commodity for sale not only at home but also abroad. There is some disagreement in the field, though, as to how far-reaching a commodity, intellectual or economic, these anthologies are. While Gayatri Spivak worries that even Taiwanese students will someday be reading, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, one of China's most classic novels, in a short excerpt in English, John Pizer staunchly disputes her claims, arguing that there is no evidence that world lit anthologies actually have a sizeable market outside the U.S. since world lit "is a uniquely American pedagogic domain" (Pizer 113). Pizer also challenges Spivak's doom-and-gloom "assumption that editors of World Literature anthologies are authoritarians or cultural imperialists acting in bad faith" (Pizer 113). He underestimates, however, the spread of world literature as a field of study. A summer Institute for World Literature, directed by David Damrosch (himself a Longman anthology editor), held its inaugural session in 2011 at Peking University in Beijing with sixty scholars from fourteen countries.⁶⁸ Peking University was an appropriate location for the first year of this program because its Institute of World Literature has been in existence since 1986, although this is not necessarily to say that world lit is taught there the same way as it is in the United States.

⁶⁸ The summer Institute for World Literature is based mostly at Harvard, the home of David Damrosch, but it will travel each summer (with every other summer normally at Harvard). It has an advisory board made up of the following members: Damrosch, Emily Apter (NYU), Murat Belge (Istanbul Bilgi University), Sandra Bermann (Princeton), Homi Bhabha (Harvard), Helena Buescu (Universidade de Lisboa), E. Efe Çakmak (Columbia), Wiebke Denecke (Boston University), Theo D'Haen (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), Paolo Horta (NYU Abu Dhabi), Djelal Kadir (Penn State), Stephen Owen (Harvard), Martin Puchner (Harvard), Bruce Robbins (Columbia), Haun Saussy (Yale), Diana Sorensen (Harvard), Nirvana Tanoukhi (Wisconsin), Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (Aarhus Universitet, Denmark), Karen Thornber (Harvard), and Zhao Baisheng (Peking).

The reach of world literature thus extends beyond the borders of the United States, and although the PKU Institute may provide evidence of different approaches to world literature, or we might even say to different world literatures, Spivak's unease about the spread of world lit resources is not entirely uncalled for. At the summer Institute, for example, the language of instruction, discussion, and reading was English, including literary criticism by Ngũgĩ, despite the fact that about half the participants were native Chinese speakers. Texts for discussion were therefore limited to what is available in English translation, even as the instructors made a conscious effort to specifically include Chinese texts. With English also serving as the oral lingua franca, as it tends to do in international scholarly contexts, academia proves itself not unlike global business in this regard. Business students around the world have been learning English to communicate with their global partners, whether or not those partners come from Anglophone countries. The same largely occurs in the study of international literatures, and not only or not mainly in terms of the literature itself but in the discourse around it. While the 1970s saw the heyday of French critical theory and philosophy, English has now asserted itself as the main language of scholarship, especially in the area of postcolonial studies, and intellectuals from developing countries often move to metropolitan centers, especially in the United States to work. This is true, for instance, of the three main "celebrity" postcolonial scholars identified by Graham Huggan: Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and the late Edward Said (4), to which we might add Ngũgĩ. Thus we see Kadir's concern about comparatists, like the American *envoy* in Ngũgĩ's novel, "function[ing] as *envoyants* rather than as *destinataires*" (73, emphasis original),

not only in the production and dissemination of texts but also ideas, ideas formulated in English, which consequently gives form to them.⁶⁹

Important as it is to acknowledge the inequalities in world literature as well as the difficulties in its circulation, this should not be an aim in itself, a sort of compulsive, self-deprecating inventory of the field. Identifying the problems needs to serve as a means of addressing and possibly even overcoming them. Pizer, for example, finds that Spivak's criticisms of world lit undermine her own goals of "a nonhegemonic, nonobjectifying approach to cultures other than our own" because she cuts off possibilities for making any first step toward achieving such "an open-ended goal necessarily denied full articulation" (Pizer 113). Spivak's goal is utopian, but that doesn't mean the goal should not be pursued, even if the steps are small or sometimes seem contradictory.

⁶⁹ See Chapter 5 for a discussion of the way ideas travel in translation, specifically the way Western Anglophone and French feminism circulates in the Czech Republic.

CHAPTER 5

Not Kundera's Sisters: Czech Anthologies in the Context of Global Women's Writing

Sarah Brouillette's incisive study on *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* emphasizes, as I have in this dissertation, the key role played by authors as people, or rather as personae, in the marketing of world literature texts:

Moreover, part of the aggressive marketing of certain titles, necessary in order for book divisions to remain competitive within transnational media firms, entails an emphasis on the connections between the book in question and its biographical author. The author's name and attached personae have become key focal points for the marketing of literary texts, such that one could argue that the current industry brands literature more by authorship than by other aspects of or ways of approaching a given work's meaning. (65-66)

Brouillette demonstrates this phenomenon through the examples of Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, J. M. Coetzee, and Zulfikar Ghose, all authors who write directly in English. The fact that these writers use English makes it easier for them to circulate, not only because of the added work and cost of translation, but more importantly because, as discussed in the Introduction, the Anglo-American literary market has proven exceptionally unreceptive to literature in translation, especially when it is perceptibly presented as such. English as their main language of output also gives authors an edge in how much direct control they have over the brand created by their public personae. The examples I have presented, on the other hand, show how the translator and the process of translation serve to mediate the author's persona in the host culture. I have mainly focused on the way those personae develop from the authors playing the role of the *agent*

provocateur, and in fact the act of provocation can directly relate as well to translation. Ngũgĩ, for example, created a stir by insisting on the translation from his work from the original Gĩkũyũ. And Kundera gained notoriety for the way he stubbornly revised the English and French translations of his work into authorized, definitive versions.

By vocally taking provocative stances in the public sphere, Laferrière, Kundera, and Ngũgĩ generated buzz in academia and the market and consolidated that buzz into a literary brand that gave them an edge over other world authors seeking translation and global circulation. The success of the *agent provocateur* image as a means of creating a literary franchise underlines Michel Foucault’s argument that the Author is far from dead; readers still experience a drive to identify a singular figure as the author of a text, what Foucault calls the “author-function” (“What is an Author?”). As Foucault notes, however, despite the identification of a named, individual author, texts are created more collectively. In previous chapters, I have described the role of other agents—such as translators, reviewers, editors, publishers, and readers themselves—in the production of literary texts and their branding. Here, I will pay particular attention to these agents as I approach the case of literature that aspires to circulate without a strong author brand behind it. The celebrity *agent provocateur* figures, like the famed global writers in Brouillette’s book, are all too often male. I here turn to overlooked women authors to ask how we might bring other voices onto the stage of world literature. In this chapter I will look at the case of Czech writing, especially by women, post-1989 to see how world literature might circulate when the author-function becomes minimized. My study centers on recent anthologies of Czech writing, where the branded celebrity author is replaced by

a list in the table of contents of unfamiliar names with Slavic diacritical marks inscrutable to the average Anglophone reader.

In Chapter 3, we saw how Milan Kundera has fought narrow definitions of himself as an Eastern European writer that “reduc[e him] to a formula” (Scianna 9). At the time of his first international exposure, this was a political formula, that of a dissident writer challenging a totalitarian regime that happened to be the ideological and geopolitical enemy of the cultures publishing his books in translation. His early success based on the paradigm of the politically dissident Eastern European writer (what Dubravka Ugrešić ironically terms the EEW) did, however, give him a platform from which to put other ideas about himself into circulation. Since that time, with the end of the Cold War, the types of cultural currency that have value have also changed not only in Eastern Europe but in the Anglo-American context. It was precisely the cultural currency he gained as a politically dissident EEW that gave Kundera the bargaining power to accede to other cultural currencies, allowing him to stay in circulation even after 1989. Not only has his work been translated into major European languages like English, French, and German, but there are also versions in several other languages including Arabic, Chinese, and Hindi. Two of his novels have made the *New York Times* Bestseller List (*Immortality* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), and in 2011 he became only the fourteenth writer to have his complete works published by the prestigious French *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* collection during his lifetime.

Ask an educated, although not necessarily specialist, reader of world literature to name a contemporary author from Eastern European, then, and they will probably come up with Kundera. Thus although he may not have entirely rid himself of the Eastern

European Writer label, he has, at least, become *the* Eastern European Writer par excellence. This is in keeping with David Damrosch's assertion that we have entered a "hypercanonical age" that favors the emergence of "celebrity authors" ("Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age" 49-50). These celebrity authors tend to take up all the literary space from their nation on the world literature stage, making it look, according to Damrosch, like "some literary Miss Universe competition" (48). Kundera represents in this case not only Miss Czech Republic, but more broadly Miss Eastern Europe. In this sense, Kundera has become the paradigm itself of the Eastern European Writer.

Such a status allows people to ask Andrew Baruch Wachtel, as "editor of a book series devoted to translations of contemporary East European literature" the question: "Why has no new Milan Kundera appeared in Eastern Europe since the collapse of the communist regimes?" (1). Here Wachtel and I are not so much interested in Kundera as such but in what he represents. According to Wachtel, "the words 'Milan Kundera' stand in for a writer who is simultaneously highly talented and world-renowned" (1). There are plenty of highly talented contemporary Eastern European writers, Wachtel argues; the problem is the world-renowned bit. After sketching out briefly the way an author might achieve world renown, Wachtel concludes that "[t]he phenomenon 'Milan Kundera' is, therefore, as much sociocultural as literary" (1), and if there are no new such authors, it is because "the sociocultural conditions that once allowed for the appearance of 'Milan Kunderas' no longer exist in most of postcommunist Eastern Europe" (2). Indeed, Wachtel's study of Eastern European writing since 1989 is titled *Remaining Relevant After Communism*. While he is partly motivated by a desire to generate interest in new Eastern European writers from his readers in English, Wachtel mainly describes the

relevance of postcommunist writers within their own countries. He ends his book by declaring that Cold War conditions united the countries behind the Iron Curtain such that literature could be seen as “recapitulat[ing] the general truths of people’s experience,” but “[n]ow that there is no longer a single society with a single shared experience, an author or work can be relevant only to a segment of the population” (218). For this reason, he believes “it is safe to say that in this new environment the appearance of another Miłosz, Solzhenitsyn, or Kundera is all but impossible” (219).

My purpose here is to look more deeply at the ways Eastern European writers, and Czechs in particular, might remain relevant not only in their own nation but also in translation now that the cultural currency of political dissidence to communism is falling out of circulation. The publication of full novels in translation from Czech, for example, has fallen off dramatically since the early 90s. Among the most notable of these, we might name Jachým Topol and Michal Viewegh, hardly as recognizable to an American or British reader as a Kundera, Havel, or Hrabal or even a Klíma or a Škvorecký. Without the paradigm of political dissidence to serve as a springboard for their work, what different paradigms might be used to help postcommunist Czech literature find an audience in translation, especially in English? What new trends in literature or trends in literary scholarship might give these writers wider currency? And most importantly here, how does the process of translation itself reflect and inscribe these trends into the text?

Such paradigms are important not only by those directly involved in the creation of the text itself (author, translator, editor, publisher) but also by those who comment on such texts: scholars and critics like Wachtel. With their access to the original languages and their knowledge of the current cultural situation in the source literary system,

scholars of Eastern European literature are well placed to find ways to relate these texts to potential readers in translation. Doing so also means reconsidering the way they approach their own work, now that the cultural currency in circulation in Eastern Europe as well as the Anglo-American context have changed. Such discursive rethinking contributes to the survival of the field of study and thus also the survival of those engaged in that field of study; that is, scholars are in a sense called upon to make the case for their own relevance as well. Caryl Emerson gave a sort of state of the field address at the 2002 conference of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages (AATSEEL) in her First Distinguished Award Lecture titled “Slavic Studies in a Post-Communist, Post 9-11 World: For and Against Our Remaining in the Hardcore Humanities.” She noted that “the Cold War was good for us professionally [because it] ... provoked curiosity” about a “dangerous, and closed off” world (449).⁷⁰ Indeed, Slavic Studies, like many Area Studies programs, grew out of a certain political climate which resulted in governmental funding because “enemies are fundable” (450). Thus Slavic Studies was not required to reinvent and innovate itself as much during the Cold War because “enemies are more easily describable” (450), which is to say that the government funding the research was quite satisfied to have a straightforward representation unsullied by complexities. As a consequence of the Area Studies structure and other conservative tendencies in Slavic Studies itself, such as its emphasis on linguistics, the field has fallen behind the times. One of the reasons Emerson gives for the decline of Slavic Studies is that it has not been as quick to adopt curricular updates like “Women’s Studies,

⁷⁰ Emerson unfortunately throughout her talk conflates Russia with Slavic Studies, a practice common in the field, and a tendency which scholars like Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska, and Elena Gapova, who together edited the book *Over the Wall/After the Fall*, have deliberately tried to combat. The traditional centrality of Russian has contributed to the lack of innovation in Slavic Studies which Emerson mentions.

Deconstruction, Multicultural and Post-Colonial studies,” and similar trends in the academy which are actually already decades old. (450). These discourses, however, can present new paradigms for keeping the literature of Eastern Europe relevant in the post-communist, post-9/11 world.

When I refer to women’s studies, deconstruction, and multicultural and postcolonial studies as discourse here, I do so in the Foucauldian sense. Chris Weedon defines Michel Foucault’s use of the term discourse as:

... ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. (108)

The second half of this formulation is especially important to the work of this chapter. That is, I am interested in discourses such as women’s studies or postcolonial studies not only as means of speaking about and constructing knowledge about texts but as means of constructing texts themselves. I realize that I am sliding the text from an *object* of study to a *subject* (as in the definition above) constituted by discourse. Texts have neither an unconscious nor conscious mind nor an emotional life. But in the era of the death of the Author, it does not seem entirely out of place to give the text a certain subjectivity. When we ascribe a particular stance to a text (instead of to its author), we are in a sense constituting it as a subject. This is especially relevant here when we are considering texts with a minimal author-function, where the audience knows little to nothing about the person behind the text, unlike the texts dealt with in the previous three chapters where the authors’ provocative image becomes part of the book’s package deal.

Following Judith Butler, however, to argue here that the text is a subject constituted in discourse is, in the end, to return it to being an object, since Butler presents “a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts” (270, emphasis original). Butler makes the case that the power of discourse is such that its function becomes naturalized and constructions, constitutions are taken as innate. This can most clearly be seen in her distinction between sex and gender: sex is biological whereas gender is a social construction, a performance of sex that in turn constructs the idea of sex itself:

Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis. (273)

The key word here is “acts,” since for Butler, gender is performative. It does not exist as such, but rather its constitution occurs in the way it performs the discourse that shapes it. I want to carry the idea of the text as constituted in discourse further to speak here about the text, especially translations, as performance.

In this sense, I want to distinguish my approach from others treating translation as performance. Scholars like Christi A. Merrill (2008), for instance, have tied this conception of translation to oral literatures. Merrill makes use of the Hindi term *anuvad*, “telling in turn,” to present translation as performance of the same story by a different translator/storyteller, a move which also puts into question the idea of an original text and an original author of that text. Ruth Blandón, on the other hand, in looking at transnational formulations of race, presents translation as a performance of identity: “language and cultural translation (and even mistranslation) is a dialogic performance

that (sometimes simultaneously) asserts the self, seeks unity with an “other,” and creates distance from self by questioning assumptions of cultural essence” (21). Both of these approaches put forward translation as a performance *of* the text *by* the translator. In contrast, I want to speak here about the text as actually itself performing discourse. It will be useful to give a similar example of reading as performance: there is a difference between performing a feminist reading of a text and the text performing feminism. To perform a feminist reading of Dany Laferrière’s *How to Make Love to a Negro (Without Getting Tired)*, showing how it mobilizes sexist stereotypes in order to break down racial ones and makes fun of women as credulous dupes (See Chapter 2), is not the same thing as saying that the novel is feminist. That is, the novel does not perform feminism. Even novels which are read as feminist, such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* are not feminist as such. The process of reading, however, makes the text perform feminism. I want to be careful here not to say that a reading or translation makes the text perform *its* feminism, as if the feminism were inherent in the text and only needs to be made evident through the act of reading. Instead, I argue that the discourse of feminism as mobilized by the reader/translator constitutes the text as feminist. If *Jane Eyre* is then mobilized as feminist discourse, we see the way that discourse becomes self-perpetuating, becomes a performance of a performance.

In this chapter, I will look at the ways contemporary Czech texts in translation perform certain kinds of discourse, such as the ones mentioned by Emerson as ways of updating Slavic Studies, specifically postmodernism and feminism or “women’s writing” to create a new brand for writing from Eastern Europe post-1989. I examine not only the process of translation itself but also the processes of editing, packaging, and marketing

that offer the texts up to the reader as representative of a certain paradigm. Again, these texts are not inherently postmodernist or feminist, but the act of editing and translating them into English mobilizes a performance of these discourses. Different translations, publications, or interpretations might mobilize the performance of different discourses, such that the same text might be asked to perform postmodernism in one context and feminism in another (or both at the same time). As these texts perform these discursive paradigms, they then help to shape and reinforce those paradigms, creating a feedback loop. If an editor introduces contemporary Czech literature as postmodernist and the text performs according to the paradigms of postmodernism, then contemporary Czech literature will come to constitute postmodernist discourse, in the same way that performances of gender constitute sex. Postmodernism itself does not exist *as such*; it, too, is a discursive construct, not a description of a pre-existing social or cultural order.

As mentioned earlier, a relatively small number of postcommunist Czech novels have been published in translation. However, there have been four anthologies to appear since the fall of the Berlin Wall. *This Side of Reality* (1996) features a close-up photograph of pickles on its cover, which gives an idea of the way its editor Alexandra Büchler places it within a tradition of typically Czech absurdism and irony. *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno: Czech Fiction from the Post-Kundera Generation* (1997), edited by Elena Lappin and published by the Czech-translation specialist press Catbird (now basically defunct), however, presents a rather darker continuation of this tradition. The last two anthologies were part of series of women's writing.⁷¹ Büchler stepped into the role of editor again for *Allskin and Other Tales by Contemporary Czech Women* (1998),

⁷¹ A third anthology of Czech women's writing was published in 2001, although it deals with a different time period, and so I leave it aside here. That book is: *A World Apart and Other Stories: Czech Women Around the Turn of the 19th-20th Century*, ed. Kathleen Hayes, Prague: Karolinum Press, 2001.

this time adding folktales into the mix of the Czech tradition she showcases. Finally, *Povídky: Short Stories by Czech Women* (2006), edited by Nancy Hawker, is designed to appeal to readers looking for a guided tour of Czech literature not unlike a guided vacation tour of Prague.

Anthologies, because of the way they bring together many different texts into a whole, prove particularly useful for this type of study that deals with paradigm shifts. Anthologies need to have some guiding principle, even if that principle is just geographic or temporal, such as Czech writing post-1989. However, anthologies, due to limited space, quite obviously require selectivity, and here discursive choices come to light, either explicitly or implicitly. An anthology of contemporary Czech literature is a performance of the state of that literature that is supposed to tell us what that literature is like. Even if the texts are simply defined as the “best” writing on offer, there must be some underlying opinions on the part of the editor, translators, and publisher about what constitutes “good” literature and specifically good *Czech* literature. What is termed “good” will depend on what sort of literature has cultural currency according to the agents creating the text. That is, it may not be that “good” Czech texts tend to be postmodern, but rather that the editors and translators of the anthologies believe that what constitutes “good” writing are the same things that constitute postmodernism, or that postmodernism is “good.” In presenting post-1989 Czech writing according to more current paradigms, the agents involved in the creation of these anthologies attempt to make that writing relevant to the Anglo-American reading public on new terms. They thus seek an audience not only for the anthologies themselves but for a broader type of writing as well, be that, for example, contemporary Czech literature not included in the

anthology or women's writing. This, then, might lead to the reader picking up a novel by one of the authors included in the anthology, or buying another anthology of women's writing in the same series but from a different country.

Before turning to the four anthologies mentioned above that shift the paradigm by which Czech literature in translation circulates, I first consider briefly the introduction by Czech author Ivan Klíma to *Description of a Struggle*, an anthology of Eastern Europe literature published in 1994. Klíma was one of those writers like Kundera to profit from the political paradigm of the Cold War to reach an audience in translation well before 1989. His introduction, entitled "Writing from the Empire behind the Wall," is a useful point of departure for this study since it performs precisely that pre-1989 paradigm which no longer proves adequate to the later anthologies. Firstly, the title of Klíma's introduction makes reference to Ronald Reagan's designation of the Soviet bloc as "the Evil Empire," thus playing up the politics of the literature. The rhetoric he uses furthermore demonstrates the paradigm indicated by Wachtel of Eastern Europe as a land united in a common struggle for freedom that represents a universal struggle for humanist ideals:

This anthology comes from a world habitually called Eastern Europe, though it would be more precise to call it the Soviet realm, the Empire of Stalinist tyranny, the Empire of great illusions, of broken dreams for a better world. For me, it is the Empire behind the Wall. Reagan called it the Evil Empire; which might make one conclude it was the Empire of a single, basic struggle. For in few other places did the struggle between impersonal power and the individual; between tyranny and the desire for a worthwhile life, assume such visible form as here, where fear became a daily companion, where tragedies were played out with bloodshed. (xix)

We see here how Klíma speaks in much the same terms as Kundera (see Chapter 3), with his characterization of invasion from the East, his privileging of the individual, and his appeal to universal ideals. Klíma does, however, move past the Good-Evil dichotomy

which characterized much of Cold War political discourse, claiming that “the bipolarity of a world divided between two superpowers reinforced and made this [dualistic] view easier; in doing so, it closed off paths to a multi-dimensional view of human destiny” (xx). This anthology, according to him, shows how writers in Eastern Europe resisted such easy dualist thinking, and thus we can see the work of the book as moving past, to some extent, the political paradigm of the Cold War. But the discursive paradigm performed here is still very much in the vein of Kundera, who also moved past a political understanding of his work to argue for (a European) humanism that could serve as a universal ideal for making evaluative cultural comparisons (see Chapter 3). Klíma correspondingly declares that *Description of a Struggle*:

... bears convincing witness to the fact that we live in a single world with similar problems, albeit some of them may have taken on sharper edges behind the Wall and so exhibit truths which might otherwise elude us. Nevertheless, the real struggle, be it between good and evil, life in truth or life as a lie, life as universal order or being in nothingness, takes place as Kafka saw it: within every one of us. (xxiv)

In following the successful Kundera brand of politics turned universal humanism, Klíma targets readers already familiar with it in order to convince them that post-1989 Eastern European literature is still, or also, relevant. To some extent, Büchler also follows this type of branding in her introduction to *This Side of Reality*; in which she describes “... the traditionally privileged status of the written word, its immense power and influence in a culture in which writers ... were seen as the ultimate moral arbiters of their society” (viii). This type of outlook, however, belongs to Kundera’s Modern Era, which even he himself announces is coming to a close. Büchler and Lappin seek paradigms other than the Kunderian one to match the discursive paradigm shift of the times, and they both rely on the paradigm of postmodernism to do so. With Kundera’s Modern Era ending, we can

begin to define the paradigm of postmodernism performed here as post-Modern Era; that is, it departs from Kundera's grand linear narrative of literary historiography, his emphasis on the figure of the Author, and his universal humanism forged from a European perspective. Since discourse, like the texts that perform it, is also constituted in its own performance, we will also see how the definition of postmodernism alters depending on the text and its context.

English-translation anthologies performing postmodernism

Daylight in Nightclub Inferno in particular displays a fraught relationship between the celebrity figure of Kundera and the new generation of Czech authors with its subtitle: *Czech Fiction from the Post-Kundera Generation*. There he is again, Kundera, the inescapable brand name of Czech writing. The back cover of the anthology further poses the question in a bold, red heading: AFTER KUNDERA, WHAT?, as if Kundera represents all of Czech literature up to this point and what follows him has been a mere vacuum before the appearance of this anthology. Reviewers of *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno* have also felt compelled to discuss the anthology in terms of the Kunderian paradigm, and they generally find the title and the premises on which it rests problematic. Kathleen Hayes, who calls the title "infelicitous," observes that the meaning of "post-Kundera" is not quite clear: "Does one measure this by date of birth or style? A glance at the biographies at the back of the book informs the reader that some of the writers are the same age as Kundera ... 'Young writers,' a category one might define arbitrarily as writers under fifty, are underrepresented in this collection" ("Daylight"). In contrast, Paul Maliszewski has no quibbles with the ages of the authors included, but rather with what the title implies about the continued literary presence of Kundera:

Calling these writers the post-Kundera generation, while factually accurate, is odd, for one because the man is still alive and writing, and for two because the younger writers are probably more accurately called postcommunist, and I find it disheartening to think of Kundera as only relevant to a world with communism. (50)

Indeed, Karen Von Kunes goes the farthest in her criticism of the book's title—and more importantly its content—by protesting that the authors included are simply not Kundera enough:

The reader cannot avoid perceiving the label *post-Kundera* as a literary criterion and an esthetic point of departure for the 'new' writers' generation, which, one would assume, regards Milan Kundera as its spiritual 'father.' It is precisely here that the reader feels cheated. A novelist of world stature, and a man of profound reflection, Kundera always has something significant to say as he simultaneously flirts with and appeals to the reader in his strong, personal voice. That voice is missing from *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno*, just as the elements of universalism which make Kundera so human, so vulnerable, and so approachable are predominantly absent in the stories, or at least do not serve clearly as a unifying force drawing together the selected pieces. (825-826, emphasis original)

Von Kunes, like Maliszewski, underscores the lasting position Kundera has obtained for himself as a paradigm of Czech writing on the world literary scene. In her very evident affection for his work and his brand of "universal" humanism, however, she appears unable to analyze it or her own views on it critically. Why, for example, would one *assume* that "new" Czech writers consider Kundera their spiritual "father," especially considering the fact that he left Czechoslovakia in 1975, makes his visits to his place of birth out of the public eye, and has been writing his novels in French since 1991?

Whereas Kunes takes the "post" in post-Kundera to mean the continuance of a tradition, the postmodernism of these texts would suggest instead "post" in the sense of coming in the wake of but also reacting against Kundera, rather than just following in his paradigmatic footsteps. I would argue that if Kundera is a father figure to the younger generation of writers, the relationship might best be described as Oedipal. Reviewer Peter

W. Schubert is, if possible, even more blunt in his Kundera-based critique, in this case of the *This Side of Reality*. He simply complains that Kundera ought to have been included in this anthology, too.

Instead, however, of performing the Kundera paradigm, as Klíma does in the introduction to *Description of a Struggle*, *This Side of Reality* and *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno* seek to cultivate an audience for relatively more recent Czech writing through the discourse of postmodernism. The titles of these anthologies do reference and thereby reinforce Cold-War metaphors—for instance “*This Side*” as in two sides of the Iron Curtain. The title *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno* also suggests that Czech literature is coming out into the light after the dark, hellish years of Communist rule. But as much as the titles play on the old paradigms of good and evil, light and dark, normality and absurdity, they also bring in the new paradigm of postmodernism. The word “nightclub,” for example, which in this case is an inferno, brings to mind dystopic capitalist infiltration after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Daylight is coming, but it’s coming to a rather seedy world. According to Lappin’s introduction:

[I]t is hard to tell from the writing which period is more infernal, the period of communism or the new period of growing capitalism. The daylight in the title comes not from the authors’ visions of the world, but rather from the quality of their writing and from their ability to publish it freely at home. (vi)

Büchler, too, makes reference to the postmodern excesses of capitalism that have overturned what seemed to be the moral certainties of the Cold War era, even calling into question that literary freedom that Lappin carefully celebrates:

But it is Jachym Topol’s narrative that opens the floodgates to the nightmarish new reality governed by the twin superpowers of today, the media and the mafia. Literature is knocked off its high ground by market forces and censored by business priorities, the books for which authors and readers once risked their

freedom are remaindered by street vendors, while the very word “freedom” has been hijacked by the jargon of economics. (viii-ix).

The excerpt Büchler mentions here is taken from Topol’s short story “A Trip to the Railway Station,” but critics have had similar things to say about the rest of his work. His novel *Sestra* (1994) has been one of the most notable book-length translations into English since 1989. Yvonne Howell examined reviews to see how the translation, *City, Sister, Silver* (2000) has been received in the United States. She concludes that the reviewers all share the assumption that whereas the Cold-War-era dissidents had a concrete enemy against which to react, “Post-Soviet literature is characterized as an exploration of the dark, apocalyptic, sinister, and surreal; it depicts a violent, fragmented, incomprehensible reality” (46). Büchler herself concurs with this generalization when she closes her introduction by indicating that Topol’s work “bear[s] witness to a new, deeper corruption of values from which there is no escape, for there are no more walls to fall” (ix). Topol’s writing is thus branded as an exemplary performance of Czech literature in which the discourse of postmodernism constitutes the currency of the text. While Topol’s text is supposed to tell us about the postmodern condition in the Czech Republic, the discourse of postmodernism itself actually engenders that reading of the text, engenders the performance of postmodernism.

The infiltration of the market into literature, as decried by Büchler is actually performed by *Daylight in Disco Inferno*, whose editors offer it up for easy consumption and speak the language of new media. The publisher’s foreword is only a short two pages, and there is no introduction from Lappin. In describing the selection of texts, the publishers perhaps meant to be hip with the mention of “three bonus selections” “[j]ust the way CDs often have bonus tracks” (vi). Furthermore, the organization is intended to

“give readers ... a constantly changing experience—from dark surrealism to comic postmodernism, from realistic narrative to stylistic tour de force. ... Also, longer pieces are separated by shorter palate clearers” (vi). The rhetoric here echoes that of the supposed shortened attention span of the new technological age, known for channel-surfing and the sound bite. At the same time, then, as *Daylight* offers literary representations of the postmodern fall into global capitalism, it also performs it.

A certain old guard in Slavic Studies has resisted, though, branding contemporary Czech writing with the paradigm of postmodernism. Von Kunes, a Senior Lecturer of Czech Studies in Yale’s department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, appears to miss those days of universalism where good was Good and evil was Evil, a world free of postmodernist complications and more importantly free of complicated postmodernist writing. In her review of *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno*, she finds the choice of three older writers for the “bonus texts” unfortunate, if the idea of the anthology is to introduce newer Czech writers, but at least she likes their work. The other selections are, according to her, “less successful: they are either too surreal to reach a general readership ..., too literarily self-conscious ..., or too forced in originality ...” (826). In her opinion, “the gem of the collection” is Vašek Koubek’s “The Bottle”: “offering all the elements of a great story: it is a simple, genuine, human tale ... it reads as smoothly as any of Hemingway’s stories” (826). She decries the doom and gloom she sees in the use of the word “inferno” in the anthology’s title, which she calls “a fatal misnomer,” since most of the stories “preserve the ‘Svejkian’ tradition of Czech humor” (826), whereas inferno “suggests a great deal of suffering, as represented in Russian literature by Dostoevsky or, more recently, by Solzhenitsyn, for example” (825). In addition to being one of the

foremost names in Czech language instruction, having written one of the subject's few textbooks—a stuffy, outdated manual—Kunes is also a scholar of Kundera, and his influence on her opinions is clear here. As we saw in Chapter 3, Kundera associates “Slavic” with Russia, a term that involves “inordinate poetization of things, feelings on display, simulated profundities, long looks which claim to say something and accuse you of not knowing what” (“Quatre-vingt-neuf mots,” 113).

Old-school Slavicists have evidently been less enthusiastic in rebranding their subject matter for a wider audience. Since these reviews mostly come from specialists in Slavic Studies writing for a more general world literature audience (the Von Kunes and Schubert reviews appeared in *World Literature Today*), it is less easy to tell if these anthologies were successful in bringing Czech authors of the newer generations to the more general Anglo-American book market through the paradigm of postmodernism. Subsequent book-length translations might give an additional indication. Of the sixteen authors featured in Catbird Press's *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno*, seven have since had full novels published in English translation, most notably Topol and Viewegh, whose first English book was already in the works when the anthology came out. Among the others now available in English, novels by Viola Fischerová (*Fingers Pointing Somewhere Else*, 2000) and Alexandr Kliment (*Living Parallel*, 2001) were released by Catbird itself before it went defunct.⁷² One novel by Pavel Brycz (*I, City*, 2006) and two by Ewald Murrer (*Diary of Mr. Pinke*, 1995; *Dreams at the end of the Night*, 1999) were printed by Twisted Spoon Press, a small independent publisher based in Prague. Finally, two of

⁷² The Fischerová was translated by Neil Bermel, who had also done her story for the anthology. Kliment's novel was translated by Robert Wechsler, who had also participated in the Catbird anthology, but for another story. Wechsler co-translated a story by Marta Kadlečíková for *Daylight*. The Kliment excerpt appearing there was translated by Andrée Collier.

Michal Ajvaz's novels (*The Other City*, 2009; *The Golden Age*, 2010) appeared quite recently at Dalkey Archives Press, the translations performed by some of the more widely known current translators from Czech, Gerald Turner and Andrew Oakland, respectively. Turner, for example, comes from the older guard of translators of Czech, having worked on texts by Ivan Klíma as well as some smaller pieces by Václav Havel and Ludvík Vaculík. While some of these authors are thus reaching an audience in English, it must be noted that it is mainly through smaller presses specializing in Czech or other translated literatures. The demise of Catbird can hardly be a good sign for a renewed relevance for Czech writing. None of the authors mentioned above can claim anything close to the world literature celebrity status of Kundera. The success of bringing contemporary Czech writing into the Anglo-American book market post-1989 has been thus far rather limited, then, with only a few inroads through avenues directed at specialized, interested readers.⁷³

English-translation anthologies performing women's writing

No new Kundera has emerged, then, out of the contemporary Czech writing that has made its way into translation through anthologies and selected novels. The performance of postmodernism in particular in anthologies has not resulted in what we might call a post-Kundera. Rather than billing their authors as part of a movement post-Kundera, *Allskin* and *Povídky*, the two anthologies devoted to writing by women, stake out an alternative movement that has always existed alongside the dominant (male) one,

⁷³ Works by the authors featured in *Daylight* have also been translated into other languages, most frequently into German and Dutch. There are also a notable number of translations into other Eastern European languages—Slovene, Bulgarian, Hungarian, and Polish—and a small amount into other Western European languages such as Spanish, Swedish, Finnish, and French.

though largely ignored.⁷⁴ In an interview with Czech radio, Büchler indicates that the motivation behind *Allskin* came from her experience editing *This Side of Reality*, when she “realized that Czech women authors had not been translated at all. ... [A]nd that really was a very simple reason. [She] just thought that they deserved to be better known” (Higgins “Alexandra Büchler”). Her introduction to the text provides a brief history of women’s writing and feminist thought in the Czech Republic and former Czechoslovakia. While Büchler does bring up politics here, including Cold War politics, it is mainly to examine the influence of those politics on the debate of the so-called “woman’s question” and the creative response of women in particular to those politics, not so much in terms of content but in terms of form. That is, Büchler’s main focus in the introduction is on the way in which women tell stories, which she maintains differs from the way most men tell stories, due to the mobilization in women’s writing of fairy tale and fantasy:

... Czech women writers have found their own way of formulating and conveying a view of the world they inhabit by incorporating elements of folk-tale, legend, myth and magic into a highly literary tradition, using what is sometimes seen as a purely feminine ability to reconcile and integrate opposites. (xvii)

Indeed, Büchler’s anthology performs this alternative form of women’s writing through its title, *Allskin and Other Tales by Contemporary Czech Women*. *Allskin* is the name of a girl in a Czech fairy tale who dresses in animal skins to hide her beauty, so not only does the title reference the fairy tale and folklore tradition on which Büchler claims this literature draws, the fairy tale chosen is also one which itself can perform feminism. In fact, Daniela Fischerová’s modern retelling “*Allskin Dances on Tables*” opens the collection. The story deals with society’s expectations about femininity, which the narrator subverts:

⁷⁴ I should note, however, that they are not completely free of Kundera. In Büchler’s introduction to *Allskin*, there is a reference to his novel *The Joke* (xvi).

I exuded the sex-appeal of heresy, and it needs to be said that was the only kind of sex-appeal I could ever claim to possess. I was a thin, sadly neglected girl. I was Allskin. ... I was one of those girls who are told, “You could be quite pretty, if you only wanted to be. Allskin didn’t want to. (5-6)

While Fischerová’s text refers directly to the fairy tale tradition, the other texts included in the anthology do not necessarily, but by titling the book “*Allskin and Other Tales*,” Büchler affixes them all with the tale label, and draws them in to a certain tradition. That is, she constitutes them as representatives of a particular genre, which for her is also a gendered one, such that the category of women’s writing is performed through what she claims as participation in specific generic conventions.

The title of the other anthology, *Povídky: Short Stories by Czech Women*, uses different strategies to place it in an even broader context of global women’s writing. *Povídky* is simply the plural of the Czech word for the short story, (but not fairy tale, which would be *pohádky*). While the title is less specific in suggesting a certain type of tradition for women’s writing, it does in fact suggest a sort of universal women’s literature when put in the context of the series, published by Telegram in London, of which it is a part. The title of each book in the series follows the same pattern as *Povídky*: the word for “story” in the source language (or presumably one of the source languages)—colon—Short Stories by “x” Women. Thus the national and linguistic specificity is balanced out by the universality of the “short story” as written by women. *Povídky* is joined in Telegram’s series of women’s writing in translation by anthologies of Iranian, Bangladeshi, Lebanese, Pakistani, Palestinian, and Irish women’s writing. *Allskin* was also released as part of a series on women’s writing, in this case by a small Seattle publisher called Women in Translation, who during the decade of the 1990s issued translations from Norwegian, Dutch, German, Catalan, Spanish, and Arabic of

novels by women authors as well as the collections: *Unmapped Women* (fiction by Japanese women), *Wayfarer* (Korean women), *Everyday Story* (Norwegian women), and *Echo, Stories about Girls* by Scandinavian women. The books on that list are even more multicultural than they appear since one of the Dutch novels is Dutch Indonesian, and one of the Norwegian novels is by an ethnic Chinese woman. The origins of the literature in both series is thus fairly diverse, and are not limited to either “Eastern” women’s writing or “Western” women’s writing; instead these anthologies take up global women’s writing as a subject of supposedly universal relevance. The inclusion of *Povídky* and *Allskin* in these series therefore allows literature by Czech women to circulate in English translation under a new paradigm, that of gender, a paradigm that functions globally and universally, as opposed to emerging out of the local Kundera paradigm. This involves quite a different type of branding for writing by Czech women, one which privileges gender as a category of greater weight than nationality.

In a radio interview, Hawker explicitly makes this connection between gender and a certain type of writing, a connection she believes can be found in any cultural context around the world. At the same time, she also explains her understanding of what that connection is, that is, what women’s writing specifically is and does that makes it different from writing by men:

I think the contribution of women writers to literature is that they take relationships to be a fact of life and they deal with them as such. This is an alternative view to relationships and I think you can see it very clearly in the stories. There is always an element of the relationship between genders or gender roles or expectations of gender roles, and they modify this, or subvert it, or give their specific angle on it. I think you can find this not only in the Czech women's short stories, but as I was reading or working on the other collections in this series, some of the situations between women or with regards to children or other members of the family were repeated in the Palestinian anthology or the Lebanese or Iranian anthology. It was interesting to see some patterns emerging throughout

the world, even if we do not believe in women's unity or some kind of women's alternative. There are still patterns that are significant, and this is, I think, why it makes it interesting for everybody to read. (Higgins "Povidky")

One pertinent question, of course, is: if in fact the stories in all the anthologies do deal with relationships in a certain way, is this because that is what women's writing—globally and essentially—is “really” like, or is the category of women's writing *performed* by these texts, is it constituted by the choices of the translator, editor, and publishers? It is interesting that Hawker characterizes women's writing as having “always an element of the relationship between genders or gender roles or expectations of gender roles,” since in her introduction, she celebrates the fact that “[w]omen's literature' is no longer relegated to the category of 'Romance and Relationships'” (10). What Hawker seems to be saying from these two statements, then, is that women's writing *does* deal with relationships, but not only with relationships, and that when it does deal with relationships, it does so in such a way as to “modify this, or subvert it, or give their specific angle on it.” She thus would be making a distinction between “chick lit” and “real” women's writing. This latter type of writing showcases the way “... women writers have put their fingers on issues that not many men have raised,” such as “attitudes toward Roma ..., the tricky legacy of the Sudetenland ..., pornography, ... broken families, ... sexual abuse of children and ... rape” (10). So while for Büchler women's writing is performed through certain stylistic, narrative, and generic conventions, for Hawker it is performed through approaches to certain subject matters.

If these two anthologies perform the gender of the writers in these ways, how do they perform the nationality of the writers? These are, after all, anthologies of *Czech* women's writing. Does the constitution of one category affect the constitution of the

other? Is there something particular to the way *Czech* women write as opposed to women from other places? And how would such a distinction give Czech women an image on the market that would help them compete with women's writing from other locations? In her introduction, Hawker declares:

I must apologize to all those who aimed to map new Czech literature, who wished to draw some conclusion about the fate of women in Eastern Europe, or who wanted to grasp the essential Czech literary style. To some extent, I have shied away from answers, and I disagree with the premise of some of the questions. My aims are modest: to offer a collection of stories that have never been published in English to an interested readership that wishes to be entertained and edified. (12)

If she intends these stories for an "interested" readership, we may well ask: interested in what? Whereas Büchler offers a thorough and insightful overview of the major developments in Czech women's writing across the last century—her introduction is by far the longest of the four anthologies I discuss here—Hawker's introduction is rather more uneven and only gets to the question of women's writing on the third of its six and a half pages. What comes just before is a brief look at the ideological shift after 1989, although her view is nuanced, as she insists upon the lack of "black-and-white terms" (8). However, the most notable thing about Hawker's introduction is that it opens not with Cold War imagery but with a completely different set of Czech stereotypes. "What," she asks, "springs to mind when people think of the Czech Republic?" (7).

The answer Hawker gives is not Milan Kundera, but rather Prague, beer, Havel, Švejk, classical music, ice hockey, and Good King Wenceslaus. Such a move implies a somewhat different readership than for the other anthologies, especially the earlier non-gendered ones. While those anthologies seemed to be drawing on an audience already versed in Cold War Czech literature, Hawker here assumes a less specialist sort of reader, a reader-tourist, we might say, and more specifically a female reader-tourist. The reader-

tourist, however, even if not a specialist in Czech literature, is not a cultural boor but does have a firm grounding in liberal education. For example, Hawker imagines an educated readership with an academic background in the humanities or social sciences when she makes reference to “the ‘Foucauldians’ among the readers” (12), and we can imagine that the translation and editing process, as well as the reading process predicted here by Hawker, will lead to a performance by the anthology of Foucauldian discourse. Here we see how the performance of postmodernism can intersect with the performance of feminism, as it does in Büchler’s introduction when she writes:

Readers familiar with Czech literature in translation will recognize the characteristic features: its inclination toward the fantastic, the absurd, the grotesque and the surreal, its penchant for political allegory and satire, its sense of irony and black humor, its lopsided view of reality. (iii)⁷⁵

The way that postmodernism and feminism constitute each other in this intersection will bring out performances of specific types of discourses: for example, a postmodernism particularly interested in breaking down grand patriarchal narratives of society or a feminism particularly interested in de-essentializing the divisions between genders.

Thus the Kunderian, postmodern, and feminist paradigms might all be performed simultaneously to varying degrees, depending upon the way the translator, editor, and publisher have constituted the translated text. To see the way that the processes of selection, translation, and editing in these anthologies create a performance of a certain discourse, we can look at the example of Alexandra Berková, the only author to appear in all four anthologies. Berková is one of the most innovative writers stylistically in recent years with a range in narrative technique from colloquial conversation to high-register

⁷⁵ Recall that the title of the other collection she edited is *This Side of Reality*.

Biblical chronicle, and all in the space of one page. Although her writing had been circulating unpublished for years, Berková's first book-length release came in 1986 with *Knížka s červeným obalem (The Book with the Red Cover)*,⁷⁶ which Büchler describes as "loosely connected narratives which trace the life of a woman from conception to death" (*Allskin* xii). As both Büchler and Hawker note, the book appeared at a time of relatively less strict censorship. Heavy on stylistic experimentation and thus deviating wildly from socialist realism, *Knížka* offered readers a welcome alternative to what had been on offer, helping it to achieve sales of 60,000 copies, a rather impressive figure in a nation of ten million inhabitants.

Berková's next book *Magorie aneb Příběh velké lásky* (1991, *Magoria: or a Tale of Great Love*) satirizes pre-Velvet Revolution society in a grotesque allegory that mixes narrative techniques, including fairy tale and pastiche socialist realism. Büchler more suggestively gives the title in English not as *Magoria* but *Loonyland* (xii), since "magor" is a Czech slang insult to indicate that someone is crazy or an idiot. Winner of the prestigious Egon Hostovský prize, *Magorie* was followed by *Utrpení oddaného Všiváka* (1993, *The Sufferings of a Devoted Scoundrel*), which might be described as *Paradise Lost* meets the picaresque. The devoted Scoundrel is cast out of heaven and roams the earth, encountering many strange people, not unlike Rabelais's *Pantagruel* in its heterogeneous and often vulgar register. Berková's next novella, *Temná láska* (2000, *Dark Love*), which deals with an abusive marriage would seem to operate on a smaller scale, but in fact it includes more grand discourse-mixing with a highly metaphorized characterization of the marriage in the larger frame of a psychiatric visit, all mixed in

⁷⁶ None of Berková's texts have appeared in full book-length translation. Their titles have been variously translated for excerpts as well as Berková bibliographies prepared in English. Unless otherwise indicated, I will use the English translation given by her literary agent, Dana Blatná (dbagency.cz).

with elements of Dante's *Inferno* and the type of allegorized social commentary found in *Magorie*. Berková's last book before her untimely death at the age of 49 in 2008 was *Banální příběh* (2004, *A Banal Story*), actually quite banal compared to her other books with a rather more straightforward telling of a romance between a Ukrainian immigrant and a woman whose husband is cheating on her. Rather than the Baroque, multilayered narrative style for which she has become known, Berková presents this story in the form of a film with short scenes, as indicated as well in the novel's subtitle, *Filmová povídka o prostém životní běh* (*A film story of the simple course of life*).

Already, the choice of which text to excerpt for each anthology provides evidence of the way Berková's work performs certain discourses in English translation and becomes branded for Anglo-American audiences. We can see the shift away from the political discourse of the Cold War in the fact that none of the anthologies include *Magorie*, which in its critique of Soviet communist society would fit easily in theme, if not in style, with the dissident Czech writing of the previous decades. Instead, both *This Side of Reality* and *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno* provide excerpts from *Utrpení oddaného Všiváka*, the former in James Naughton's version titled *The Sufferings of Devoted Lousehead* and the latter as *The Sorrows of Devoted Scoundrel* translated by Jonathan Bolton. Since, as I have argued, these anthologies largely present contemporary Czech literature in the paradigm of postmodernism, *Utrpení* can easily be used to fit this role, most notably by performing postmodernism's renewed interest in the Baroque.

If postmodernism is in many ways a reaction against modernism, then the Baroque is of interest to postmodern discourse mainly to figure the pre-modern. It thus represents a pre-Enlightenment style of literature free from the tyranny of rationalism and

order and marked by an excess of signs, styles, and referents. The Baroque makes heavy use of metaphor, allegory, folklore, and satire, and the picaresque was one of its signature forms. Although the narrative structure of the picaresque is linear, the progression of the action might be described as “flat,” as opposed to Freytag’s pyramid with its climax and resolution. The picaresque is a genre of movement, but it’s not going anywhere in particular; the end destination is not as important as the various encounters along the way. Such is the case with Berková’s *Všivák* who sometimes remains in a place for the space of several pages, other times for only a few paragraphs, with no logical progression from one location to the next. We can also see Berková’s subversive use of religious and folkloric discourses, another feature common to the Baroque. The novella opens, for example: “... in the beginning there is nothing—force fields—whirlwinds and waves—look, smoke: Is there a right angle anywhere?” (*Daylight* 147, ellipsis original). A few lines after having undermined the gravity of the Genesis story, Berková deflates the fairy tale: “it could, incidentally, be phrased otherwise: once upon a time everyone lived in paradise happy as a kitten” (*Daylight* 147). The way the text undercuts serious discourse with simple, ironic language also performs the postmodern Baroque, which favors heterogeneous language with signs piling up on top of each other. I have already drawn a parallel with Rabelais, and such a relationship is important here in that Rabelais has enjoyed a postmodern Renaissance based on Bakhtin’s rereading of his work as exemplary of the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, carnival “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all ranks, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (10). We might find, then, the divine combined with the vulgar, as we do in the prayer to *Všivák*, which begins:

Devoted Scoundrel,
our brother!
Thou, who have been chosen to writhe in anguish instead of us,
Thou, repudiated for our sake, suffering for us, infinitely striving for us,
forgive us our depravity, in which, inexperienced, we persist,
as we forgive ourselves, wretched and weak—
—but that's just the way we are—what do you want from us—our prince!
sun of our days!
intercede for us!

and ends on a far less sacred or decorous note:

When I realize how lonely I am, I actually cry and feel like a drink ...
intercede for us!
well? is it a deal? Can I count on you?
Thanks!!
I knew you were a pal!
amen (*Daylight* 151-2, emphases original)

The carnivalesque, in its sheer permissiveness, encourages the use of the grotesque and the downright scatological, which can also be seen in Berková's text, for example, in the journal of a man who has recorded his master's "instructions for future generations":

... today I saw another dead animal, dead for some time, the way I like them—but ... its gray color had been skillfully concealed with red aniline dye, its greasiness covered with sawdust, and its stench hidden by the scent of tar—it was pretty hard on my stomach ... and I relieved myself in the bathtub: it's so—liberating.
(*Daylight* 158)

So far, I have been quoting from Bolton's translation in *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno*, largely because some of the passages I mention above are not included in Naughton's translation in *This Side of Reality*. While the two versions are about the same number of pages and both start from the opening of Berková's novella, Naughton's does not proceed from there with the integral text but skips sections without any indication in the translation that the excerpt is in fact *excerpts*. Since the picaresque is not really plot-motivated as a genre, such a practice makes little difference in following the course of the story, but where it does make a difference is in the way the two translations perform

postmodernism. I have discussed above how Bolton's translation in particular performs postmodernism in terms of the neo-Baroque. This aspect is certainly not absent from Naughton's version; in fact, his title—with Vřivák rendered as Lousehead instead of Scoundrel, evokes a more bodily and grotesque image in keeping with the carnivalesque, as Naughton makes use of an etymology that refers back to *veř*, louse. But in the later passages that *This Side of Reality* includes, other discursive features of postmodernism are performed. For example, we see the mixing of various narrative styles, but in addition to the pre-modern forms of allegory, parable, sacred text, and fairy tale, we also have postmodernism's emphasis on hypermediatized forms of discourse and multiple perspectives. The selection in *This Side* thus features a news interview where a reporter asks several bystanders about Lousehead sightings, playing up to sensationalist media excess associated with postmodernism (174-176). Rather than following traditional narration, the scene is presented in the form of a transcript or film script, as is the final scene in the excerpt, which deals itself with narrativity. In this passage, Lousehead goes to the market in the Little Land and pays a site administrator so he can set up shop as "a narrator" (178), showing the commodification of culture. Lousehead begins to tell his story, but members of the audience interrupt him with various questions and digressions, and the storytelling session soon devolves into insults and a literal fight for who has the right to speak. This scene thus performs the multiplicity of voices and the subversion of the *authority* common to postmodernism.

The sorts of literary features described here in *Utrpení oddaného Vřiváka* are not unique to this text in Berková's oeuvre. That is, her other texts published before these two anthologies could also have been used to perform contemporary Czech literature as

postmodernism. *Utrpení oddaného Všiváka*, too, can be used to perform feminism and women's writing in addition to postmodernism. In the excerpt included in *Daylight in Disco Inferno*, for example, we find the following statement: "In another city there lived a woman with large, imploring eyes: her punishment in life was being born a woman, as everyone knew" (156). This sentence opens a passage describing the life of the woman who lives with her husband, who lavishes gifts and affectionate words on her but withdraws every time she tries to look at him or touch him. Such a passage can be read according to feminist theory which critiques the objectification of women in which they are not allowed to display or act upon their own desires. Another dysfunctional couple is presented in the passage which precedes this one, performing a feminist critique of the tendency of women to be forced into maternal roles. The woman, "loudly lamenting," tells Scoundrel how "he wants me to be tender, though he never was to me, and to take care of him, though he never took care of our children, and to have sympathy for him, though he never had sympathy for his aging parents. He wants everything for himself—" (154, 155). Bolton's version in *This Side of Reality*, however, does not incorporate these two passages. By including the portions of the text on media and narrativity, then, as opposed to these two about relationships, we can say that Bolton's translation works to favor the performance of postmodernism rather than feminism.

The opposite can be said of the excerpts included in *Povídky* and *Allskin*. According to Hawker, Berková is "the most significant avowed feminist [included in the anthology], although nearly all authors touch on gender roles" (10). We have just seen how even Berková's work that does not take as its main subject gender or women's experience also touches on gender roles, but the editors have here included in their

women's writing anthologies excerpts from texts other than *Utrpení oddaného Všiváka* or *Magorie*. In fact, both anthologies go back to her first publication, *The Book with the Red Cover*, for their selections. The first story from *The Book with the Red Cover*, "Mininovel" also opens *Povídky*. Since the story describes, from an unborn child's point of view, how her parents got together and eventually conceived her, it seems a fitting opening to the book, as if starting a life story not only of a woman but of women's writing. The story takes the form of reported dialogue interspersed with only very minimal actions; the first lines are indicative of the rest of the text:

When Mum and Dad ran into each other they said, it's been ages, what have you been up to all this time. And Mum said, I guess I'll have to get married. And Dad said, why have to and why guess, and Mum said, have to because I don't want to, and guess because I guess I'll do it. And Dad said, marriage is an outdated institution, let's go to the cinema. And Mum said, thanks but I don't have time. So they went. (15)

The very subject matter of the story performs women's writing as defined by Hawker, that is, it deals with relationships and gender roles, although in a potentially subversive way. Here the mother is reluctant to marry but feels she must, and interestingly the father calls marriage "an outdated institution." Later the couple will have to navigate an unplanned pregnancy, which results in the birth of the narrator, but not before they consider abortion, single motherhood, marriage, and then finally settle on having the baby together without that outdated institution of marriage.

The way in which the story is told, with its informal, spoken register of largely reported speech also performs women's writing, although more closely associated with Büchler's definition. Broadly we can say that the oral family history stands in contrast to an official written history, which has been one of the movements in women's writing and feminism in general, as women have often been left out for the most part of chronicles of

History. In the story, the unofficial nature of the narrative can be seen in the time markers, such as “a week later” (15, 17, 18), “a month later” (15), “three days later” (19), “two hours later” (21), and the frequently repeated “then.” These time markers give a sense of the duration of the story and how the separate scenes relate to each other in time, but there are no dates, no years or months, which places the story outside of an official history. We don’t know where and when the story fits into the grander scheme of Czech history. While the alternative history form performs women’s writing, it also performs postmodernism which posits histories over against a singular grand narrative History. Here the intersection between postmodernism and other contemporary movements, including feminism, postcolonial studies, and multicultural studies, becomes apparent, combining to give voice to previously marginalized groups and redistribute narrative power.

“Funeral,” the Berková story that appears in *Allskin*, also performs both feminism and postmodernism, but its postmodernist narrative technique more closely resembles the carnivalesque of *Utrpení* than the low spoken register of “Mininovel.” The story is, in fact, literally carnivalesque, as the funeral for someone identified at first only as “the man” becomes a public festival, with “allegorical floats,” “tableaux vivants,” “motley clowns and conjurers, with much blaring of party whistles, rattles and hooters, tutu dancers popping off garish firecrackers, everything flashes and glitters, the whole place is full of singing, hue and cry and clamor ...” (74, 75). The seedy postmodern influence of capitalist excess also appears at the funeral, as the festivities are followed by a market where the people can buy “a spray of Number Five perspiration, a holographic Santa, self-polishing thigh-boots, self-suffocating braces, brawn in a powder mix and perfect

reproduction fire, indistinguishable from the real thing!” (82). These goods take on a more Westernized air in the translation, where Mikuláš (Nicholas), the saint whose holiday is celebrated in the Czech Republic on December 6, is replaced by Santa Claus, who exists in the Czech Republic only as an import, although most Anglophone readers would not be aware of this.⁷⁷ Furthermore, other products offer a feminist critique of the beauty industry in which cosmetics are sold to reproduce “natural” looks: “the pale girl gazed at opalizing soaps and phosphorescing creams, the invisible make-ups, lotion that makes hair go bleached as if in the sun, an ointment that makes the skin sunburnt ...” (82). While the solemn occasion of the man’s death has become a frenetic and commodified public spectacle, the story goes even one step further in undercutting the gravity of death and its commemoration. Even as the town lets loose in the streets, a character referred to only as Great-Aunt undresses the body, rolls it in a tablecloth, and carries it off for the actual burial where she unceremoniously tips the corpse into a garbage dump. Thus the story performs neo-Baroque postmodernism in its subversion of the sacred and emphasis on the body in all its corporeality.

Along the way to the garbage dump, Great-Aunt is joined by a man in a helmet who used to know the deceased. The interactions between these two characters demonstrate the way the translated story in particular performs feminism. As they walk, the man philosophizes on death and on the difference between men and women: “Things are complicated so often in this life, he said, only you wouldn’t ever grasp how that is. A woman doesn’t grasp things the way a fellow does. Women have it simpler” (78). Certainly the man expresses a sexist point of view, that women have an easier life because their mental capacities do not allow them to tackle complicated subjects. But

⁷⁷ Ježíšek, little baby Jesus, brings presents in the Czech Republic on Christmas Eve.

even while the man belittles the intellect of women, the translation performs a subtle, contrasting valorization. In the Czech, the man uses casual speech, spoken rather than standard written Czech. This is noticeable, for instance, in the way that he refers to gender. The standard words for man and woman are *muž* and *žena*; indeed, the man is designated as *muž* throughout (Czech has no articles). In the quote above, however, he says *chlap* and *ženská*, informal terms. The translation conveys this by the word “fellow” for *chlap*, but in the English, there is no indication of the corresponding use of *ženská*, which can perform in Czech to sound dismissive or condescending. So in the translation, no matter what he may think of them, women remain women and not “birds,” for example, as this is a British English translation. The use of “woman” for *ženská* continues in the translation, but as the man talks about his fear of death, *chlap* is given as “bloke” instead of “fellow”:

Only, that sort of thing don't interest a woman, questions like that, women don't care about that. That's just the way you are, you see. Sort of simple and straightforward. Looking after people, and that sort of thing.

Um ah well—said Great-Aunt, shifting the bundle over to her other shoulder.

But a bloke—a BLOKE, you follow?—he's in the world for a totally different reason! A BLOKE, he's—he oughta—he has to—know what I mean?

Yes, yes, said Great-Aunt.

Has to PROVE something!—DO something!!—simply in a nutshell—leave some kind of TRACE—or IMPACT!!—after himself—something GREAT!!—you know what I mean ...

I do, said Great-Aunt.

Anyway a woman can never understand that kind of thing ... in a nutshell, there's got to be something—SOMETHING!! (78-79, ellipses original)

The use of “bloke” here signifies not only a man, but a “real” man, a manly man, who has proven himself in life. Yet even as we have more and more indicators of the man's casual speech—“oughta,” the grammatical irregularity in “that sort of thing don't,” the repetitions, etc—“woman” remains “woman,” making her a stable category somewhat

resistant to the man's characterizations. In fact, this characterization can be interpreted potentially more positively in the translation. When in English the man says, "That's just the way you are, you see. Sort of simple and straightforward," in Czech he says, "Vy už ste holt takový. Takový jednoduchý" (martinreiner.cz). In this case, the single word *jednoduchý* has been rendered with two: simple and straightforward. The "simple" could be read as "uncomplicated" but also "simpleminded," but the addition of the second word "straightforward" encourages a more positive reading. Here, of course, the man is critiquing the "straightforwardness" of women as opposed to men who are compelled by deeper, and higher, philosophical questions. But we also see the way the man struggles with those questions and does not manage to articulate any profound thoughts, in fact does not even manage to articulate complete sentences: "A BLOKE, he's—he oughta—he has to—know what I mean?" The supposed straightforwardness of women, then, actually becomes valorized in contrast to useless, pseudo-esoteric philosophizing. Great-Aunt agrees with the man's statements, but only in a way that appeases him, as if he were a child. A critique such as this is not far from the characterization of Kundera by Anatole Broyard (see Chapter 3), who argues that two of Kundera's stories are "little more than pseudo-sophisticated psychologizing thinly disguised as fiction" ("Iron Bedsheets"). In this sense, we can view Berková as a provocative anti-Kundera.

This approach of the characters to existential questions also serves to constitute the genders of man and woman in certain ways, as Great-Aunt's no-nonsense attitude toward death is juxtaposed throughout the story to the man's fearful meditations. She deals very straightforwardly with death, as we are reminded when she "shift[s] the bundle over to her other shoulder." The man, on the other hand, is wearing the helmet because at

“[a]ny moment something could fall on [his] head!” (79). To this confession, Great-Aunt maternally replies, “I’d be glad to help you any way I could, mister, but I don’t know how,” just as she tosses the corpse into the garbage dump, giving her concern for the man an ironic edge. The words she pronounces to the corpse also show a maternal care that is limited in its scope to practical, or straightforward, matters: “Well now, my lad, she said, this is the most I can do for you—tidy up your mortal integument. The wind’ll scatter it with earth and birch trees will grow, she said, shoving on top some broken glasses, cans and grit” (79). In a new paragraph just following the “cans and grit” we get the final lines of the scene: “If only you could see yourself now, Franta, you with all your fine talk—there you are in that sack and I’m still here” (79). No indication is given here as to who has said this sentence, and Berková’s non-standard punctuation does not make it obvious either. What is most striking, then, in the way that the translation performs as opposed to the Czech text is that Berková has written “zašeptal muž” after Franta’s name—that is, “whispered the man” (martinreiner.cz). Whereas in the Czech, then, the man expresses a sense of melancholy for his brother-in-arms, the translation allows for a more feminist performance in which Great-Aunt triumphantly announces the victory of female practicality over futile male philosophy.

The translation thus performs feminism differently than does the Czech text, a situation which puts into question feminism as a discourse with a unified and universal identity. In “Funeral” Great-Aunt resists the man’s belittling comments because of the intransigence of discourse (a woman is a woman is a woman and never a bird a chick or a lady). To say that the translation performs feminism differently is not to say that the source text does not perform feminism, although I do want to be careful not to say that

the source text performs *its* feminism, as if it were always already necessarily there. Choices made by the translator, editor, and publisher bring out certain performances, for example, as we have seen, postmodernism over feminism. Those discursive choices thus construct a discursive identity for the text, which, like gender or even sex, is not a given but only emerges in constitutive processes, in this case of translating, interpreting, or editing. This slippage in discursive identity is just one further manifestation of postmodernism and feminism as discourses that interrogate essentialized categories.

The text may be constituted differently than its author may wish, as was the case for Kundera, but Berková at least had no problems with her texts being associated with women's writing. She declared quite plainly in a documentary, "I'm a feminist, and I'm proud of it" (Sommerová, *Feminismus*). But as Andrée Collier argues in her review of *Allskin*, not all Czech women writers would be as comfortable with this label: "Ironically, due to a pervasive Czech distrust of feminism, many of the authors included would think little of being singled out as women writers" ("Allskin"). Thus the currency of feminism and women's writing in Anglo-America differs from that in Czech Republic. There and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, according to Wachtel, "[w]omen writers, even those inclined to feminism, leave at least one layer of irony to distance themselves from feminism in the form of an active and organized movement" (161). By not taking on the label of feminism, these writers help to avoid the "distrust," as Collier calls it, and sometimes the downright hostility toward feminism in the Czech Republic. Aggressive Czech anti-feminism can be seen, for example, in the vitriolic statement made by one of the most renowned writers of the Kundera generation, Josef Škvorecký, who emigrated to Canada and found Western feminism—or his own understanding of it—appalling:

The worst thing that can happen to a good idea is to have some fanatic, à la Lenin, make it the basis of an ideology. ... The idea of equal rights for women in all spheres of private and public life gave birth to the idea of women's superiority. Their spokeswomen (and spokesmen—masochism knows no gender) create the typical “front line” of feminism which, at its most extreme, is openly lesbian and radically anti-male. (cited in Smejkalová 233)

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine how feminism is constituted in the Czech Republic by Czechs themselves, and how this depends to some degree on their own contact with the Western discourse of feminism either through time spent in the West or through readings in the original languages or in translation. If above I discussed the way Anglophone editors brought out feminist performances in Czech writing, in this last part of the chapter, I pay particular attention to how Western feminism is constituted in the Czech context through the process of translation as well as how the constitution of feminism and women's writing as discourses are then performed in contemporary Czech literature, especially by women.

Czech discourses of feminism

According to Czech feminist scholar Mirek Vodrážka, the current attitude toward feminism in the Czech Republic has its origins in a historic emphasis on the equality of citizens rather than the difference of citizens. For example, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of modern Czechoslovakia and a respected social philosopher, declared, “There is no woman's issue, there are only human issues” (cited in Vodrážka “Before the Great Exodus”). While Masaryk is often considered a pioneer in women's rights—the “Garrigue” in his name comes from his 1887 decision to take his wife's surname in addition to his own—Vodrážka does not believe his importance to feminism should be overstated: “There are even activists who go as far as to interpret Masaryk as a ‘radical feminist’. They take no heed of the postmodern question of whether a radical feminist

can also be a ‘humanist’” (“Before the Great Exodus”). This humanist line of social reform held sway throughout the days of the First Czechoslovak Republic, so that even in the woman’s movement during the 1920s,

... the women’s issue was viewed, at best, as a transient side-issue of the Universal Social issue, and as such would ultimately cease to exist ... In the worst case, the women’s issue was treated as subversive, as a manifestation of civic non-solidarity and a-social character which undermined the sacred, universal basis of civic society. (“Before the Great Exodus”)

After the advent of Soviet-style communism, the dissidence movement, led by figures such as Vacláv Havel, mobilized the discourse of humanism and citizens’ rights as a means of resistance against the regime. We have already seen how Klíma, in his introduction to *Description of a Struggle*, argues that Soviet oppression resulted in “a single, basic struggle. For in few other places did the struggle between impersonal power and the individual, between tyranny and the desire for a worthwhile life assume such visible form as here ...” (xix). Because the emphasis was on a “single, basic struggle” against communism, other struggles, such as feminist ones, remained secondary. The individual at the center of the dissidence movement was a sexless one.

While dissident activities called for solidarity in the face of the regime, socialist ideology also called for solidarity in the face of capitalism. Accordingly, proletarian women should fully participate in the struggle, including in national production, and so equal participation in the workforce became the ideal. Feminist scholar Gerlinda Šmausová concludes that while the imperative to work had a tendency to give women less control over reproductive issues, it did allow for greater parity, both in the workplace and in the home, where the scarcity of some goods meant more handyman-type work on both sides:

The alliance of men and women, paradoxically induced by both official, emancipatory socialist politics as well as household shortages, and later by political pressure in the era of normalization, is one of the reasons for the deprecation of feminism as an ideology of gender conflict. (199)

After the Velvet Revolution, women largely retained their earning power, which they viewed positively in comparison to their counterparts in the West, who, the Czech women believed, minimized the question of class and income in favor of feminism as “a language game” (201). Thus, according to Šmausová “[f]eminism ... collided with the lived experience of Czech women, who in many respects felt themselves to be more competent members of society than Western emancipated women who were implicitly put forward as a model” (201). One stereotypical opinion, then, is that feminism is for rich housewives with too much time on their hands. In the words of Vodrážka, “feminism is generally viewed as a luxurious western commodity not needed in our country” (“Before the Great Exodus”).

A look at two Czech books of interviews with women provides a useful means of understanding the way Czech women perform the discourse of feminism, especially depending on their positionality in relationship to the West. The interview format is a popular genre in the Czech book market, especially for interviews with women, which derives from the feminist discourse of alternative histories. A collection of interviews is transcribed—either directly with the questions and answers, or somewhat edited to appear as a monologue—with the interviewees representing various perspectives around a certain theme, such as aging or the Romany population. The most notable books for women in the genre are by Olga Sommerová, based on her well-received documentaries beginning with *O čem sní ženy* [*What Women Dream About*] (1999). Two more books followed: *O čem sní ženy 2* and *O čem ženy nesní* [*What Women Don't Dream About*].

The documentary also had a male counterpart released in the same year *O čem sní muži*. Sommerová chose a wide range of subjects for her interviews: intellectuals, artists, teachers, an engineer, a cleaning woman, a foster mother. In the published volume of interviews, Sommerová poses similar questions to all the women participating, asking, for example, about their childhoods, their marriages and other romantic relationships, whether they are afraid of getting older, whether they are glad to be women, and what they see as the differences between men and women. The discussions do not have a highly theoretical tone and come across much more as intimate conversations between friends, especially since Sommerová mostly uses the informal “you” form in Czech. It is notable that not once in the interviews does any of the women use the word “feminism,” except in the last selection in which a friend interviews Sommerová herself and asks how the filmmaker arrived at her feminism (195). Certainly other women address what would be called feminist thinking, yet they never make reference to feminism as such, nor to other words associated with feminist discourse. Kateřina Pošová, for example, a journalist and translator, responds to Sommerová’s question as to how she views the difference between men and women: “Not in any way. My whole life I’ve never made any difference between beings of the male and female sex. ... I don’t see any reason to. In my opinion, that would only be a *certain kind of racism*” (152, emphasis added).

The discourse is much different in the interview collection entitled *Ženy mezi dvěma světy: Deset životních příběhů žen, které odešly do ciziny a po letech se vrátily* [*Women between Two Worlds: Ten life stories of women who moved abroad and returned years later*], which is part of a project called Paměť žen [Women’s Memories]. Paměť žen draws specifically on the genres of oral history and narration, which, as mentioned

above, play a part in some forms of feminist discourse. In this case, the organization makes it clear that their oral histories not only contradict official patriarchal History, but are also “a reaction to Western European and American feminist theories that could not have been applied within the lived reality of women in post-socialist countries” (<http://www.womensmemory.net/english/>). Interestingly, the women featured in this volume of *Paměť žen*'s project emigrated during the communist regime to such places as Canada, the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy. Pavla Frýdlová, the editor, chose to present the interviews as monologues, so it is impossible to know which questions she asked and how they were phrased, but the number of times the women employ the word “feminism” is flagrantly higher than in *O čem sní ženy*. Indeed, some of the women are activists for feminist causes, such as Marie Saša Lienau, who started the organization ProFem and has worked with the Gender Studies library and *Paměť žen* itself, and Rost'a Gordon-Smith, who testified before parliament about workplace discrimination against women. The women featured in *Ženy mezi dvěma světy* are precisely, therefore, one of the major avenues for the import of Western feminism into the Czech Republic.

There is, as already mentioned, a good deal of resistance to that importation. As Jiřina Rybačková, author of the book *Svět zvaný Amerika* [*A World Called America*], notes, “A lot of people here [in the Czech Republic] are allergic to the word feminist,” even if they agree with many of its principles (*Ženy mezi* 59-60). Lienau, now one of the most important feminist activists in the Czech Republic, agrees:

In the early years, it was often very difficult to say in public that I worked in a women's organization, for the women's movement. To use the word feminist was to make a fool of oneself; for the majority of Czech society, being a feminist constituted being a crazy woman. (182)

Since she has moved back to Prague from Germany, Lienau has been hopeful that things will change, but she clearly believes that much of that change will come from outside the country rather than from within:

I don't think that in the Czech Republic in recent years anything much fundamental has changed in that direction [of equal relationships between men and women], except for maybe young women who have lived abroad for some time and don't put up with a lot of things. But otherwise it's going to take as long as it did in Western Europe. I note each step in that direction with pleasure, even if for now it's only those nine fathers in Prague who have parental leave. And I place hope in that fact that, thanks to open borders, we'll get a fresh breeze from Europe. Whether people want it or not, they can't keep saying, "nobody's going to tell us Czechs how we're going to have it here." In that way, I consider myself an enthusiastic European. (187)

One of the major ways, of course, that feminism can be imported from Western Europe and the United States is through translation. In the first half of this chapter, we have seen how the process of translating, editing, and publishing contemporary Czech literature occurred such that that literature performed Western discourses like postmodernism, feminism, and women's writing. That is, for example, postmodern discourse constitutes what it means to be postmodern, and when texts are then constituted in and by that discourse, they then serve as yet one more example of postmodern discourse, so that the process becomes a self-perpetuating discourse machine, not unlike the self-perpetuation of gender norms. If the Anglo-American market favored translations from Czech that performed Western discourses, what happens when those discourses are translated into Czech? How, for instance, is Western feminism performed in Czech? In what ways do the texts perform Czech ideas about feminism? If discourse is a means of thinking about the world and the language that constitutes that means of thinking, how do

you translate a discourse into a language and culture that constitutes the world differently, where the same terms of knowledge do not exist? As Jiřina Smejkalová states:

Such commonly used words as “marginal,” “oppressed,” “alternative,” were part of different language games and political struggles before 1989. The terms “gender,” “discourse,” or “representation” do not have Czech equivalents at all and have to be used in their English versions. Thus, translated feminist texts are loaded with even more of a flavor of obscurity. (236)

Indeed, in her foreword to Ann Oakley’s *Sex, Gender, and Society*, when Marie Čermáková explains the term “gender,” as opposed to sex, she even tells the reader how to pronounce it phonetically in Czech (*džendr*) (11). What discourse of feminism do Czech translations perform when so many of the words, and thus concepts, seem to be uneasily borrowed?

As Čermáková notes, access to Western feminist discourse is available to those who study English or other foreign languages, and indeed this is the *main* form of access since very little has been published in translation “that would help orient those interested in gender and feminism” (11). According to her guesstimation, the number can’t be more than five or so publications. While the situation is not quite as extreme as Čermáková believes, the offer is, in fact, rather poor. For Anglo-American readers without access to Czech, the texts available in translation become more or less what they know about Czech literature, and so if Czech texts in translation perform postmodernism, then Anglo-American readers will have a tendency to believe that at least one of the major features of contemporary Czech literature is postmodernism. Similarly, Czech readers without knowledge of English, French, or German will take Western feminism to be the discourse performed in those translations; they will take the feminism constituted in those translations to be what feminism *is*. Because of the extremely small number of

translations, the Czech constitution of the Western discourse of feminism will not necessarily be representative of that discourse in all its complexity, just as with contemporary Czech fiction in English. Indeed, even Butler, whose ideas have shaped this chapter and who is one of the leading contemporary thinkers of feminism, has not been translated into Czech, although *Gender Trouble* is available in Slovak, which would be readable for a Czech person.⁷⁸ The publication dates of the original texts demonstrate that, although the amount of translation of feminist discourse has increased since 2000, very few of the translated texts were actually originally published after that year, such that Western feminist thought in the Czech language is stuck in the early 1990s. Fortunately, the prevalence of English as a language of study makes many of the “missing” texts available to scholars with an interest in gender studies. These intellectuals can then engage in a different sort of translation process by bringing in the untranslated Western works into their own scholarly writing in Czech.

In addition to these scholarly texts, there have also been more popular books about gender translated into Czech. The most notable, and controversial, of these are two books by Elisabeth Badinter, a French historian and professor of philosophy, dubbed a “contrarian” feminist by Jane Kramer in a recent *New Yorker* profile (“Against Nature” 44). The presence of Badinter among the few translations into Czech is telling in the way it performs a counter-feminism to the currently more dominant Anglo-American

⁷⁸ To give an idea of the Czech canon of Western feminism, I list some of the major texts that have been translated from French and English in order of appearance in Czech, with the original date of publication given after: Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe* (1966, 1949); Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1991, 1970); Hélène Cixous’s, essay “Le rire de la méduse” (1995, 1975); Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism* (2000, 1993), Ann Oakley’s *Sex, Gender and Society* (2000, 1972); Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract* (2000, 1988); Naomi Wolf’s *The Myth of Beauty* (2000, 1991); Julia Kristeva’s, *Jazyk lásky. Eseje o sémiotice, psychanalýze a mateřství* (2004, from *La révolution du langage poétique* and *Histoires d’amour* 1974 and 1983); Gilles Lipovetsky’s *La troisième femme : Permanence et révolution du féminin* (2007, 1997); and Kristeva’s *Polyphonies* (2008, collected from various works).

feminism. Despite her credentials, American gender studies scholars have largely dismissed her work as unfounded, polemical generalizations. In France, her books are bestsellers, and a 2010 survey of readers of *Marianne* magazine named her the most influential intellectual in the country. Her *Fausse route: Réflexions sur 30 années de féminisme* was published in Czech translation just one year after its appearance in French in 2003. Significantly, the subtitle of the book in Czech, rather than referring to “30 years of feminism” is given in Czech as “*Slabé ženy, nebezpeční muži a jiné omyly radikálního feminismu*”: “*Weak women, dangerous men, and other mistakes of radical feminism.*” Sociologist Miloslav Petrušek’s back-cover blurb proves equally dismissive of feminism, as each time of the three times he uses the term “feminine discourse,” he precedes it with a condescending “so-called,” as he does for “political incorrectness” and “gender studies.” In contrast to his disgust with “radical” “so-called feminist discourse,” Petrušek approves of Badinter’s approach:

The author distinguishes the struggle for women's rights, a great sociological theme of “the status of women in society” that loses nothing in gravity, from the extreme attitudes of some very influential and authoritative representatives of so-called feminist discourse. She claims and proves that a feminism obsessed with incriminating the male gender and the problem of identity ignores the real social and human problems of women.

The Czech translation of *Fausse route* thus performs Czech reactionism to Western feminism portrayed as a radical, single-minded discourse. The text’s characterization of particularly Anglo-American feminism feeds into the type of anti-feminist rhetoric employed, for example by Škvorecký, positing Western feminism as a new kind of discursive tyranny. The translation of *Fausse route* was followed in Czech in 2005 by the translation of *XY: de l’identité masculine* (1992), an earlier text from Badinter’s oeuvre. In her introduction, Pavla Horská, a historian who has written about early Czech

feminists, also performs an anti-Western-intellectual-feminism discourse as she points out that the book was a bestseller, “[n]ot that Elisabeth Badinter’s university colleagues would notice her new book on the same scale. Even feminists did not apparently enthuse much over it” (256). But more than the anti-radical-feminist discourse, through the introduction, the text performs the attitude that Western feminism is irrelevant to Czechs, thanks to their grounding in humanism:

It seems that Prague at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century—especially in the Czech milieu—did not suffer from the misogyny of Viennese decadence. In Bohemia, that is, the opinions of F. X. Šalda or T.G. Masaryk had considerable influence on opinions, and they looked at the contemporary “women’s issue” more as a serious social problem affecting men as well as women rather than as an echo of Western feminism. (258)

Horská’s tone then becomes self-congratulatory when she indicates that while this book may be useful in the Czech Republic as a window into the world of the history of Western European gender roles, there are few lessons Czechs can take from it about their own lives; rather the opposite is true: “And as a consequence of the stance of these Czech emancipationists, as these women called themselves, there was an attempt, in the early 20th century, at a sort of reconciliation with the world of men, not unlike the one Elisabeth Badinter hopes for in the future” (259).

Czech anthologies performing women’s writing

Thus Czech feminism performs the current trend of feminisms, as opposed to Feminism, that respond to local situations rather than creating an essentialized vision of womanhood the world over, regardless of class, race, sexuality, etc. But it also differentiates itself in such a way as to verge on arguing at times that the “woman’s question” has already been settled in the Czech Republic. As Büchler writes in the introduction to *Allskin*: “It is ironic that the ‘women’s question’ was raised far more

vigorously almost a hundred years ago, and that in the literary sphere, contemporary critics show little understanding of the specificity of women's writing" (viii). As Hawker mentions, aside from a few major names like Božena Němcová, woman writers have often been relegated to the "chick lit" section and are paid far less attention than are men. This was true as well during the communist era when all the most important translation publication releases in English were of male writers like Kundera, Havel, Škvorecký, Klíma, Vaculík, and Hrabal. The publication of *Allskin* and *Povídky* helped upset this balance in the Anglo-American market, and may have contributed to a similar jump in women's writing collections in the last few years, when three such volumes have appeared: *Ženy vidí za roh* (2009, *Women Can See around the Corner*), *O čem ženy píší* (2008, *What Women Write About*), and *Ty, která píšeš: Čítanka současné české ženské povídky* (2008, *You Who Write: A reader of contemporary Czech women's short stories*). Before that the *Antologie nové české literatury 1994-2004* (2004, *Anthology of New Czech Literature*) featured only 12 women out of 65 authors total, or less than one-fifth of the volume. If, as Büchler argues, Czech critics "show little understanding of the specificity of women's writing," and as we have seen, the discourse of feminism differs in the Czech Republic, what kind of women's writing do these Czech texts perform, in comparison with the ones translated into English and collected in anthologies in Anglo-America?

The editors and publishers of the collection *Ženy vidí za roh* suggest, as does Hawker, that what women write about is relationships. The back jacket of the book features one-sentence summaries of each story. Halina Pawłowská's story is presented as one where a professor goes on vacation "with her lover," Alice Nellis writes about a

“marital crisis,” Irena Obermannová shows that “a relationship with a married man is probably not the road to happiness,” Petra Soupkupová describes the existential crisis of a “frustrated wife,” Hana Andronika presents a mother “pathologically loving her son,” Daniela Fischerová’s tale asks whether for a woman with special powers “a man can be found,” and Eva Lustigová relates the story of “former lovers” who redevelop a relationship years later. Only two of the stories as presented do not tackle romantic relationships: Věra Nosková’s look at the world of women’s gossip magazines and Irena Dousková’s study of an aging actress thrown out of the theatre. The title of the collection—*Ženy vidí za roh* [*Women Can See around the Corner*] also implies an innate difference between men and women, one which posits women as intuitive rather than rational. The front cover of the book displays a stylized nude female figure coquettishly closing her eye, with another eye wide open on the back of her head, all against a background of pink. The beginning of the back-jacket matter poses the questions: “Can women really see around the corner? Are they really as prescient, intuitive, and empathetic as they’re said to be?” It is interesting that this supposed intuitive and emotionally sensitive aspect of women becomes the focus of the collection since only one story deals directly with these sort of “special powers.” While all the other stories are firmly rooted in realism, Fischerová’s “Baba” (“Crone”) relates the tale of a woman who finds that she “can see around the corner,” giving the title to the collection as a whole. Thus this popular collection of short stories performs an essentialized sort of women’s writing where the figure of woman draws on her intuition, over rationality, in her relationships.

In the foreword to *O čem ženy píší* [*What Women Write About*], which is clearly a take on her film *O čem ženy sní*, Sommerová also presents an essentialized spiritual woman: “the real gift of womanhood and motherhood is the value which lets us recognize by way of visionary women the female mystique of the 21st century” (9). If the title implies that we will find out what women write about, Sommerová suggests it will be the life of women, as seen through the eyes of women:

Creation by female writers does not have authorship by a person but by a woman. Woman doesn't live through her destiny as a person but as a woman-person. It wasn't until the 20th century that Czech and world literature reached after the rare, artistic, flashing symphony of female voices that complete, after long centuries of the political, social, and artistic dominance of men, the actual picture of two-in-one humanity. (8)

Sommerová's introduction, then, while it insists upon a difference between men and women, performs again an essentialized and shared notion of womanhood, something that unites all women such that they can relate to writing by other women in ways they cannot to men's writing, who describe the world in a way foreign to them. Unfortunately, much of the writing offered up here, while it may perform women's writing to a fairly popular market in the Czech Republic, does not really speak to Western feminists, as it utilizes clichés no longer considered empowering there.

While *Povídky*, *O čem ženy píší*, and *Ženy vidí za roh* all perform a discourse of women's writing which associates it especially with a certain way of approaching relationships, Vladimír Novotný, in the foreword to *Ty, která píšeš* [*You Who Write*, the Czech indicates feminine grammatical gender] presents relationships between men and women as the main subject matter of not only women's writing but of all writing in general:

After all, literary men and women write about the same world in which they live and in which we also live, together with heroes, antiheroes, heroines, and antiheroines of all presented prose texts, only in some of them it's possible to strikingly and inventively distinguish their feminine contours, in yet others to robustly and energetically sketch out their masculine silhouettes. Sometimes in the midst of that, nevertheless, they happen as if the roles were completely reversed or overturned. But all in all, each one in countless different ways writes with varying intensity and various temperaments but always about the same thing—that is, about in what way the given aggregate of texts is defined as the precursor model of every anthropocentric literary narration, whereas certainly not by chance right at the beginning, just in the very first words of Hana Andronikova's story: "Once upon a time. She loved him. And he loved her. They lived together." (9)

Rather than an essentialized feminism, Novotný performs rather a humanism based in individuality, and thus perhaps not too far from the postcommunist Kundera paradigm: "it's not a matter here of women existentialists bravely and courageously tackling the world ... or postmodern reflection on the seemingly infinite spectrum of various concepts of behavior, actions, and thought" (12-13). Rather what is at issue here is "[t]he world ... in its most elemental element ... so that in these texts we permanently meet with the phenomenologicality of the world" (13).

Novotný thus takes women's writing out of any specificity that feminists, Czech or otherwise, would assign to it. He may be reacting to what Halina Janaszek-Ivaničková has described as the situation in socialist writing pre-1989:

The consequence of this trend of thinking in Slovak and Czech literature took on the form of conviction that there is no feminist literature, only good and bad literature. If a work written by a woman was described as "feminist," this signified that it was defined as bad literature. (48)

This is similar to Kundera insisting upon the large world context for evaluating a work, rather than the small national context, or to Laferrière insisting that he does not want to be labeled as a black, Caribbean, or immigrant, what-have-you writer, but only as a good or bad one. And yet the stories collected in the book Novotný is introducing are

all by women writers, and thus perform that paradigm in various ways, depending on the context. While the paradigm of women's writing may come with a certain set of discursive expectations, for example that texts should deal with "women's issues" such as gender relations, child-bearing, or family life, it also helps to these texts to gain a different sort of currency in the West and sidestep the Cold-War or even postcommunist paradigm. At the end of her review, Collier expresses the hope that *Allskin* will "inspire translators and publishers to bring us more of the words of these women and others ("Allskin"). The continued publication of such anthologies indeed has the potential to generate a market for translations of full novels by Czech women, such that they may succeed in Anglo-America where the male Czech authors circulating under the paradigm of postcommunism and postmodernism have largely failed. With the disproportionate attention given to female authors in English-language translation anthologies, there may also come a rectification of the literary gender imbalances in the Czech Republic itself. And finally, we may eventually be able to talk about these women without having to mention Milan Kundera.

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