

Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature. By Rebecca Walkowitz. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015. 336 pp. Cloth \$24.00, e-book \$39.99.

There can be no doubt that today world literature is translated faster and more broadly than in any earlier epoch. Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* is not the first work to point to this phenomenon, nor even the first to tease out the implications of the current conditions of world-literary circulation for the novel form, but it is by far the most thorough and extended attempt so far. Tim Parks, for example, in a series of blog posts for the *New York Review of Books*, has argued that writers, anticipating their translation (above all into English), are doing away with local idiom and regional singularity, thereby making way for what he calls the "Dull New Global Novel." *Born Translated* gives a far more in-depth and nuanced assessment of the situation, not simply bemoaning what is lost in contemporary works produced with translation in mind but rather registering their formal innovations and possibilities.

The title may be misleading, but to her credit, Walkowitz is very clear that hers is a book about the contemporary *Anglophone* novel. She manages to collect a remarkable archive to represent it including writers as nationally, thematically and generically diverse as J.M. Coetzee, China Miéville, Walter Mosley, Caryl Phillips, Jamaica Kincaid and Adam Thirlwell. Despite this focus, she does read some non-Anglophone authors for contrast, occasionally throwing in a Murakami or Pamuk between the Mitchells and the Ishiguros. Nonetheless, the "age of world literature" is for her one marked by the dominance of English and her chief interest lies with works produced within, rather than works trying to gain access to, this dominant sphere. This has the added effect that readers coming to this book for an argument about the theory and praxis of literary translation are likely to be disappointed. The actual act of translation or the comparative merits of alternate translations are rarely, if ever, discussed. This is not to say that for Walkowitz translation is merely a metaphor. On the contrary, she is deeply interested in the history, sociology and economics of translation. But her chief concern is with the way in which contemporary Anglophone novels have thematically reflected and formally adapted to the likelihood of their multinational and multilingual circulation.

At its weakest, *Born Translated* reads like a long list of disparate features forcibly united under the book's title term. Walkowitz tells us that the compound adjective "born-translated" was coined in analogy to "born-digital," a term used to describe works that are made "on or for the computer" (3). Born-translated literature is "written for translation from the start," approaching "translation as medium and origin rather than as afterthought" (3). Unfortunately, as it turns out, there are great many ways for translation not to be an afterthought, which can cause the reader to wonder what Walkowitz's book might have accomplished if she had chosen a more precise definition for "born-translated" works or if she had adopted a larger list of key terms for describing the myriad ways in which works may be influenced by translation, incorporate translation history, address translation thematically, perform cultural translations, or anticipate their own translations. Walkowitz does give her readers the beginnings of a map to the various kinds of born-translated literature, pointing out in her introduction that they may be "*written for translation*" (in order to access other markets by being translated into other languages), "*written as translations*, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in

fact, been composed,” and, rather more mysteriously, “*written from translation*,” which seems to indicate works written with reference to the history of translation. But that is not the end of it. Born-translated literature “highlight the effects of circulation on production” (6); often it focuses “on geographies in which English is not the principle tongue” (22), it “engages in a project of unforgetting” the ways in which dominant languages benefit from other languages (23); and it “strives to keep belonging in play” rather than expanding it (25). There are several sufficient conditions, none of them necessary, for Kazuo Ishiguro’s works to be considered born translated, ranging from biography, craft and authorial intent, to thematic content and aesthetic function, including these: “he writes in English while thinking about readers in other languages;” he writes in “a second language;” he “has spoken of his effort to create works that appear to be translated from another language;” his works “emphasize the influence of global circulation on histories of art’s production;” the works “decouple the meaning of artworks from the expression of intrinsic culture;” and they “test the value of aesthetic originality as a baseline for political agency” (94-95). J.M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year* is “born translated because it was published in multiple languages almost simultaneously” (51). Works written by Jamaica Kincaid and Mohsin Hamid seem to qualify for born-translated status simply because they are written in the second person, which, presumably in a way different to first or third person novels, makes them “seem translated, written for someone else, from the start” (167). As Walkowitz’s catalog of ways to be born translated grows, it begins to seem that it would take a very rare contemporary novel not in some way to belong to the category.

One of the most intriguing aspects and most valuable contributions of Walkowitz’s book is her sense of the contemporary. One of the pleasures of *Born Translated* is that while it is a scholarly book advancing a theoretical intervention in its field, it is also a pretty decent chronicle of the literary *avant garde*, tempting its readers to explore its archive of important current authors as well as “independent websites and small coterie presses” (235). The result is that when she speaks of the ways in which literary production anticipates its circulation, one gets the feeling that she is drawing from a larger set of contemporary works than those she presents in the book. Contemporaneity does double work in Walkowitz’s book, signifying both works belonging to the present age that Walkowitz has immersed herself in, as well as ones that inscribe their situation in history. The latter idea of contemporaneity is for Walkowitz tied to translation, which (as a theme) is “contemporary because it allows us to consider that the work we are reading includes subsequent editions as well as previous ones. [...] That is translation’s paradox: it is contemporary, above all, because it is historical” (5-6). This sense of contemporaneity relies on an *awareness* of a work’s moment in time that in turn relies on an awareness of both its past and future, something which comes as a corollary to being aware of translation. Thus, writing about Sharmila Cohen and Paul Legault’s online “Manifesto of the New Translation,” Walkowitz presents their argument, which is also, in translated form, her argument: “an artwork enters the world through translation because only through translation do we know ‘what it’s like that it’s there.’ This is not simply a phenomenological argument, in which the work exists because there is someone to interpret it. Rather, it is an argument about history and comparison, in which the work has meaning because we place it alongside other works in other languages; we give it history and form by claiming it for the present” (236).

Despite the sometimes self-defeating polyvalence of its core concept, *Born Translated* is a remarkable achievement. Walkowitz’s prose is engaging, never less than intelligent, regularly yielding quotable gems like “translation is the engine rather than the caboose of literary history”

(5). Her archive is fascinating. And while it has little to say to specialists in literary translation, *Born Translated* is a landmark work in the field of contemporary Anglophone literature and should be read by anyone interested in recent theorizations of world literature.

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