The Global Literary Field
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Edited by

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CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PRESS
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume contains some of the outcomes of a research project called “The Social Context of Literary Production and Consumption”, embedded in the now defunct SOAS/UCL Centre for Asian & African Literatures. The Centre was established in 2000 through generous funding from what is now called the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). We hereby thank the AHRC for its support. We should also like to acknowledge the constant encouragement for our project that we received from the Centre’s director and vice-director, Professors Andrew Gerstle (SOAS) and Theo Hermans (UCL). We owe a further debt of gratitude to Drs Ross Forman and Douglas McCabe, who helped organize some of the workshops that were part of the project. And we thank, especially, Gillian Hudson for making all practical arrangements related to the project and its activities. Finally, we thank all scholars, too many to be named, who participated in the project workshops and who, through their presentations and contributions to the discussions, helped bring about the results presented here.
INTRODUCTION

ANNA GUTTMAN, MICHEL HOCKX
AND GEORGE PAIZIS

The papers collected here were first presented during a gathering in May 2005, devoted to what we then called “the global literary economy”. That gathering was the final of four workshops held under the aegis of a research programme that focused on the social context of literary production and consumption. Previous meetings had dealt, respectively, with the institutions of literary education and literary criticism and with national literary fields. Resisting eurocentric bias, all workshops featured large numbers of papers devoted to Asian and African literatures. The position of those literatures within a global system of literary activity was often at the centre of our discussions. By raising the theme of a global literary economy for our final meeting, our working hypothesis was that there is indeed such a thing as a worldwide literary community, organized along principles of competition and capital accumulation roughly similar to, but not reducible to, those described by Pierre Bourdieu for the literary field of France. By substituting the word “field” for the word “economy” in the title of this book, we want to signal the fact that this collection is about more than just the various financial and symbolic transactions that take place within that community, but also about the community itself, its members, its institutions and its products.

At the time of our gathering, somewhat to our discredit, we were not aware of two books published in the preceding year that specifically take up the question of a global literary field. The first of these is Pascale Casanova’s The World Republic of Letters, originally published in French in 1999 but catapulted towards international academic attention in 2004 by its inclusion in a series edited by Edward W. Said for Harvard University Press. The second is a collection of essays, many of them first published in the New Left Review and some of them written specifically in response to Casanova’s work, edited by Christopher Prendergast and entitled Debating World Literature. It is fitting,
therefore, that in this Introduction we spend some space discussing how our work relates to these two important publications.

In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova ambitiously attempts to present a “world literary history”, featuring the emergence of various competing national literary spaces and eventually a relatively autonomous international literary field. She argues that autonomy from the nation and from politics (rather than, in Bourdieu’s case, from the market and from financial profit) is what is at stake within this global community. She describes the phases of development of this community from roughly the Renaissance period onwards, putting much stress on the unequal relationships between major (French, German, English) and minor literatures, the latter only able to achieve international recognition if they disavow their domestic concerns, or re-package them as universal. This part of Casanova’s argument is of particular significance to our collection, as it directly concerns the global position of Asian and African literatures, many of which are discussed in the following chapters.

Casanova also signals that this community is currently endangered by the emergence of an equally international but not so autonomous, commercialized literary sphere, in which publishers increasingly limit themselves to the production of world bestsellers. In Casanova’s words:

> Even the freest countries in world literary space are…subject to the power of international commerce, which, in transforming the conditions of production, modifies the form of books themselves. The rise of multinational conglomerates and the very broad diffusion of internationally popular novels that give the appearance of literariness have called into question the very idea of a literature independent of commercial forces. The “intellectual International” imagined by Valery Larbaud, who in the 1920s foresaw the advent of a small, cosmopolitan, enlightened society that would silence national prejudices by recognizing and promoting the free circulation of great works of avant-garde literature from all over the world, now stands in danger of being fatally undermined by the imperatives of commercial expansion. A world literature does indeed exist today, new in its form and its effects, that circulates easily and rapidly through virtually simultaneous translations and whose extraordinary success is due to the fact that its denationalized content can be absorbed without any risk of misunderstanding. But under these circumstances a genuine literary internationalism is no longer possible, having been swept away by the tides of international business.1

This fear that the demise of print culture (“the form of books”) might lead to the demise of literary (and indeed intellectual) autonomy is strongly reminiscent of Bourdieu’s famous “Postscript” to *The Rules of Art*, in which he, too,

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advocates the establishment of an intellectual International.\(^2\) As we shall see, the present collection contains a number of contributions dealing with the circulation and marketing of bestsellers, both of the “high” and of the “low” variety. In some cases, our contributors are as suspicious of commercial publishing forces as Casanova, but we do not see simple condemnation as an adequate response. Instead, we prefer to incorporate as many different types of literature as possible into our scope of analysis.

The fear of attacks on the autonomous nature of the field, it should be pointed out, is mainly a producers’ fear. Writers, critics and scholars whose allegiances and interests lie with the continued existence of “high print culture” are bound to perceive commercialization as a turn towards the uniform and the mediocre. For actual readers, however, especially for lay readers, the emergence of the new media provides a much wider diversity of opportunities to participate in literary culture, ranging from gathering information about authors and literatures without needing to rely on publishers’ blurbs or critics’ recommendations to participating actively in valuation processes through publishing online reviews. Although it is too early to tell whether such readers’ behaviour might constitute a challenge to the global commercialization of literature, it is certainly worthwhile to draw lay readers into the analysis, and this is what is done in a number of essays in Parts Two and Three of this collection.

Another similarity between Casanova and Bourdieu is that both insist that their sociological investigations into literary practice and the behaviour of literary figures will ultimately lead to a better understanding of literary texts. In *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu invests heavily in the idea that his reading of Flaubert overcomes the old antagonism between the “intrinsic” and the “extrinsic” approach. Similarly, Casanova in her “Introduction” claims to seek to “overcome the supposedly insuperable antinomy between internal criticism, which looks no further than texts themselves in searching for their meaning, and external criticism, which describes the historical conditions under which texts are produced.”\(^3\) This attempt by sociologists to cross over into the realm of literary criticism and interpretation has failed to convince many in that realm and is indeed methodologically suspect: one cannot observe the game and play it at the same time. Casanova’s lack of skill when it comes to close reading literary texts is the basis of Christopher Prendergast’s critique of her work in his own contribution to *Debating World Literature*.\(^4\)

\(^3\) Casanova, 4-5.
Focusing on textual details of some of the works discussed by Casanova, Prendergast demonstrates that “world literature” (the term itself signalling his emphasis on the textual, compared to Casanova’s “world republic of letters”, signalling her interest in the community in which the text is embedded) is more than a system of competing national literatures. He raises examples demonstrating that other concerns than the nation (for instance, class) influence the way writers write and that there are other relationships between “major” and “minor” literatures than all-out competition. Moreover, he casts doubts on the robustness of Casanova’s knowledge of the term literature, the complexity of its history and the variety of its genres.

Prendergast seems especially keen to show that nation and literature do not always go hand in hand. He looks at literary texts cited by Casanova as evidence of their authors’ concern with inter-national competition and argues that they can be interpreted differently. He shows, for instance, that in a key text by Kafka, Casanova has confused “Kafka’s sense of humour with the statement of a literary programme. It doesn’t tell us much about the prose of *The Castle.*”5

Ironically, to the neutral reader comments like this only lend more credibility to Casanova’s main argument: that the international literary establishment turns a blind eye to literature’s pragmatic functions in favour of an autonomous aesthetic according to which Kafka’s sense of humour is more important for an understanding of his prose than his sense of national identity or his awareness of international literary rivalry. In many places, Prendergast’s critique of Casanova relies on similar invocations of authority, insisting that she does not read literary texts properly. It is certainly not irrelevant that he starts out on the first page of his “Introduction” by referring to Casanova’s occupation (“she is a journalist”) and by situating her “outside the narrow precincts of professional academic expertise.”6 In short: Prendergast’s critique seems methodologically once removed from Casanova’s work. Whereas Casanova attempts, and often succeeds, to occupy a meta-position vis-à-vis the literary field, Prendergast firmly sticks to the established rules of the game. The problem, as mentioned above, is that Casanova at times appears too eager to want to play the game as well and this is what makes her argument vulnerable to insiders’ criticism.

The predicament of the outsiders looking in, craving to obtain recognition for their writing in an established field dominated by institutions located in powerful nations, is really what Casanova’s book is all about. For the Chinese

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6 Prendergast, “Introduction”, in *Debating World Literature*, vii. Interestingly, in a later footnote Prendergast does give Casanova scholarly credentials, when he uses her work to comment on “a (bad) habit in French literary scholarship”, this being an example of Prendergast himself succumbing to the temptation of nation-based rivalry, albeit not in the literary but in the academic realm. Prendergast, “World Republic of Letters,” 11.
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literary critic fulminating about the lack of Nobel Prizes for Chinese authors, the suggestion that this lack of recognition is not a political but an aesthetic question ("the Nobel Prize is not given to nations, but to authors", as the establishment argument often goes) is well-nigh infuriating. To Casanova’s credit, she does not exploit this kind of resentment. She notes the unequal relations within the global literary field, but she does not protest their partiality.8

The contributors to this volume take mixed approaches to these problems. Some are closer to Casanova, some are more like Prendergast. What is worth pointing out, however, is that apart from contributions by text-based literary scholars and by sociologists of literature, we have also included contributions by scholars working in language-based area studies, bringing to the analysis skills that neither Casanova nor Prendergast possess, namely a command of one or more “minor” languages and an insider’s sensitivity to a one or more “minor” literatures. Moreover, some of our contributors work with “minor” literatures written in “major” languages such as English and French (Singapore literature, Anglophone and Francophone African literature). Some resentment or partisanship occasionally come to the fore, especially in the three essays that constitute Part IV, discussing the “politics of translation”. On the whole, however, we steer clear from laments as well as from establishment prejudice and try to focus our attention on understanding, from as many angles as possible, what goes on in the literary world and in world literature. As the following overview will show, the ultimate strength of this collection lies in the wide range of literatures addressed, not just by discrete essays but also within the essays themselves, as all contributors adopt a comparative approach, situating “their” literature within a global context.

This theme is made most explicit in Part I of this book, devoted to “National Literatures in Global Contexts”. Philip Holden’s opening contribution relates directly to the above-mentioned problem of interpretation. Is it possible to read and analyse English-language Singapore novels without reverting to either a move outward (labelling the text as, say, postcolonial English literature) or a move inward (holding the text up to domestic, “parochial” standards)? Or, in other words, can the scholar of literature occupy a position in between, or

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8 A prime example of this, related to the Chinese case, is Casanova’s strong endorsement of the 2000 Nobel Prize for Gao Xingjian, which she calls a “truly free, literary, and literarily courageous choice” unrelated to political or diplomatic factors. For Casanova, Gao Xingjian is the perfect example of an “international writer” who achieved autonomy from an oppressive, inward-looking and therefore internationally not recognized national literary system. Casanova, 152.
outside, the main binary in Pascale Casanova’s work, constituted by national traditions on the one hand and international values on the other? Holden presents readings of three novels, Fiona Cheong’s *Shadow Theatre*, Vyvyane Loh’s *Breaking the Tongue* and Shirley Lim’s *Joss and Gold*, in which he attempts to contextualize, as much as possible, on the basis of the global and local histories that produced the novels and their stories, reaching out for a critical perspective that does justice to these “transnational texts”.

In the second chapter, Reiko Abe Auestad looks at the problems of attributing value to a work of literature in the face of contending forces of text and literary context that exist within a given historical and economic whole. The case of the Japanese novelist Murakami Haruki is particularly rich because he is an author, and translator, whose influences are obviously international yet who, in the first instance, gained huge literary success – but not critical esteem – within his own country. His propulsion onto the world literary stage generated new pressures that illustrate the contradictions between the needs of the market and those of literature and secondly between what a text “is” and how it is received – both by readers and professional critics. Ultimately, as in the case of Holden’s essay on Singapore fiction, the problem is one of deciding on a point of reference in the tension between local and the global.

Auestad’s analysis of the trajectory of Murakami’s fame both in the original Japanese and in English translation demonstrates that the question of value attributed to a work is relative to the context within which it is read. Faced with the inevitability of contending influences and contexts that are an integral part of the globalized literary republic (to use Casanova’s term), the chapter ends with a discussion of “hybridity” versus “hybridization”: the first is made up of elements that constitute the process of creation and reception within a globalized literary environment, while the second consecrates the confluence into a permanent and essential state.

Stuart Davis’s chapter on the “Generation X” in Spanish literature offers an altogether different perspective, dealing with what Davis aptly calls a literature that constitutes “a recognized but peripheral part of the Western canon.” Here we are dealing with a literary community that features an establishment that is fiercely nationalistic, acting as gatekeepers of the notion of Spanish culture as unique and homogeneous. In stark contrast to this, the works of “Generation X” writers such as Ray Loriga, José Ángel Mañas, Lucía Etxebarria and Pedro Maestre, display a blatant admiration of Anglo-American popular culture not entirely dissimilar to that of Murakami Haruki. Davis sees this as “a desire to place the local, lived experience in the wider global context.” This reaching out from the outdated values of the domestic towards contemporary international standards (what Casanova calls “the Greenwich Meridian of literature”) is shown by Davis to have a significantly different “performative status” within
the Spanish context, where it breaks with the time-honoured tradition of defining generations within the Spanish canon on the basis of uniquely domestic criteria, not of participation in a global phenomenon. The fact that a “Generation X” exists in other countries than Spain makes the domestic evaluation of this group of writers more complex and, as Davis shows, often leads to their facile dismissal as “lowbrow”.

The second part of our collection deals specifically with texts that travel between countries and cultures that are geographically far apart but share the same literary language: English. Anna Guttman’s essay examines the patterns generated by the fictionalization of Jewish characters in postcolonial fiction, specifically Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, whose protagonist is a member of the small community of Jews in India. As Guttman shows, the critical reception of Desai’s novel struggled between the global and the local, alternatively reaching for images of universal value and ones derived from literary racial-cultural stereotypes of Jews. The nature of the dilemmas and the alienation of the hero were seen as profoundly European and this was the key to its appeal to the US readership, making it more successful among American Jewish rather than Asian readers. The book was embraced and lauded as a book about ‘Jewish themes’ and issues important to Jewish life. Switching back and forth between “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” perspectives, Guttman traces the historical relationship between US middlebrow culture and the US Jewish community, pointing up many similarities between Jewish writers and postcolonial South Asian writers in terms of their struggle to achieve establishment recognition without effacing their cultural or national identity, often leaving them with no choice but to write middlebrow works in which their culture is presented in line with existing “western” stereotypes. The processes involved strongly recall Casanova’s description of the challenges facing minor literatures in the global field. However, the added value of Guttman’s analysis is that it shows that the production of international middlebrow bestsellers by postcolonial writers is a direct outcome of the competition within the global field and not, as Casanova would have it, the outcome of a process of commercialization that takes place outside it.

Danielle Fuller’s investigation into the reception of Atlantic Canadian fiction within Atlantic Canada, in Canada’s metropolitan centres, the United States and Britain draws attention to the complex ways in which texts produced in a particular locale are constructed and consumed by multiple reading publics, both professional and popular. Atlantic Canadian fiction has enjoyed an increased global profile since the 1990s, according to Fuller, due to the ability of its authors to insert themselves into blockbuster culture, albeit in different ways. The push for increased profits in the publishing sector does not, then, exclude all regional writing – indeed, in this case, globalizing forces have made Atlantic
Canadian writing profitable as well as popular – but requires that authors and their works partake in media spectacles that ultimately serve to shape reception among both reviewers and lay readers, such as participants in Oprah’s book club and posters on Amazon. Fuller provides a detailed analysis of the reception of, and spectacle surrounding, three recent bestselling Atlantic Canadian novels. While this spectacle can take a variety of forms, from the accretion of literary prizes to the construction of myths of authenticity, the disavowal of the economic in the act of marketing is a recurrent feature. This disavowal reflects the tension generated when bestselling literature crosses generic lines, threatening the erstwhile division between high and popular culture. Furthermore, Fuller argues, while audiences may be open to reading previously unfamiliar regional writing, they often understand Atlantic Canadian writing using older, colonial paradigms, or else appropriate it for a national space (whether Canadian, Scottish or American), sometimes obscuring the books’ overt content in the process. Such readings are underlined, according to Fuller, by our unease about globalization – the very phenomenon which has brought these books to most readers – and its innate potential for cultural homogenization.

In Chapter Six, Carolyn Hart turns towards English-language literary production in Africa and its diaspora. Hart bases her analysis in part on interviews with writers and publishers at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair and in part on a textual analysis of the work of Jamaican author Opal Palmer Adisa. She describes at length the difficulties facing writers and publishers of Africa and its diaspora when it comes to attracting attention to innovative writing that moves beyond realist, linear narrative. Like the authors of the previous two chapters, Hart shows that opting for middlebrow writing is a much more convenient strategy for the writers she studies. Her emphasis, however, is on the positive efforts undertaken by groups of women writers in trying to situate their work with smaller, innovative publishers, especially in the US. Her discussion of Adisa’s career also shows the significance of Master’s programmes in creative writing at US universities, which often provide Anglophone writers from Africa and its diaspora with stepping stones into the US literary world. Adisa’s case also shows, however, that the “flattening” of local culture in one’s writing (or, as Casanova would have it, the disavowal of one’s nation) is the inevitable price that these writers have to pay, regardless of whether they attempt to write works that are highbrow, middlebrow, lowbrow or avant-garde.

Part III focuses on the global circulation and consumption of literary texts. This part of our collection moves the furthest away from Casanova’s paradigm, as it involves genres and communities that she would not consider to be part of the “world republic of letters”. In Chapter Seven, George Paizis presents a
detailed study of the business practices and global market success of Harlequin Enterprises, the world’s largest producer of category romance fiction. On the one hand, Harlequin fiction is probably the most globally accepted genre of literature in existence in our world today. It is a product of globalization in the strictest sense, as virtually all of its products are produced in the West and spread to countless countries around the world where consumers have developed a taste for the product. On the other hand, as Paizis shows, Harlequin’s sales are in decline and its business practices are forced to adapt both to the rise of electronic publishing and the Internet, and to the gradual spread of non-Western popular culture, such as Japanese manga comics.

In Chapter Eight, Mulaika Hijjas extends conventional understandings of globalization in her discussion of the reproduction and transnational circulation of an exemplary piece of nineteenth-century Malay language literature. Understanding the history of such literature and its circulation challenges our gendered understanding of literary consumption and production, disrupting the teleological narrative of modernity that globalization ostensibly offers. Modern constructions of Indonesian literary history, ironically, have fixed Syair Sultan Abdul Muluk and its author as the property of one ethnic group and one nation, but the original text was likely hybrid in its origins and appropriated by and for diverse performative and reading contexts. The emergence of commercial printing in the Riau archipelago, rather than overtaking oral and manuscript circulation, existed alongside, and in a symbiotic relationship to, these older traditions. Texts that corresponded to Orientalist ideas of non-Western literature found their way into print first, both in the colonies and in the metropolitan centres, precisely because they were not threatened by mass production. The same technologies and global cultural currents that brought the syair to international prominence in the nineteenth century, however, ultimately caused its demise in the twentieth. Globalization, Hijjas argues, has contributed to the rejection of the hybridity of the Malay language literary tradition, and to the repression of the prominent role women played in its development, in both Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as to the marginalization of this once-celebrated literature on the world stage.

Chapter Nine, co-authored by Mary Leontsini and Jean-Marc Leveratto, is the most sociological of all contributions to this collection. Employing strictly empirical methods, the authors compare and contrast the “ordinary” critical discourse produced by readers for the Amazon websites in Anglophone and Francophone communities by examining Amazon readers’ reviews of an international best seller, J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace. The analyses presented on the Anglophone sites as a rule relate the general to the particular and individual moment of meaning and pleasure. These reviews cover various aspects relating to the author, ranging from the author’s literary standing to his ability to
stimulate a satisfying group discussion. As far as comments on the text are concerned, the public attributes—prizes and awards—are tested against the reviewer’s experience and judgement. The categories involved include style, thematics and effect; exceptionally, these are brought together into a synthetic construction of textual meaning in the light of the human condition.

The French reviews were much fewer in number. One significant difference was that the status of the author figured less prominently since the Francophone readership seemed less familiar with the wider body of Coetzee’s work. The focus of these reviews was on the general rather than on the dynamics of personal appropriation of the text, emphasizing universal or human themes. How much this has to do with the lesser familiarity of these readers with the author or the approach to texts inherited from their education remains unclear. Either way, the relationship to the text is that of the outsider, the “objective” professional as opposed to that of the passionate consumer. The essay’s most significant revelation is that, even in globalized spaces such as Amazon websites, for the moment the tools of the “local” appear still more powerful than those of the “global”.

No discussion of the global literary field can be complete without research into translation. The three essays that constitute the final part of this collection each take a critical look at the conditions under which decidedly minor literatures are transformed into products for the very large markets of English-language and German-language writing. Kathryn Woodham’s statistical evaluation of translation practices with respect to Sub-Saharan Francophone fiction (and her evaluation of the statistics themselves) explores the uncertain and often marginalized space to which such literature is often relegated in the Anglo-American literary market place. English-speaking readers in general seem to be underexposed to texts written in other languages; far more works are translated from English than into it. Furthermore, Woodham demonstrates that the availability of Sub-Saharan Francophone novels in English translation has decreased as a result of corporate mergers and takeovers in the publishing industry, causing one of the most prominent vehicles for such translations in the UK, Heinemann’s African Writers’ Series, to be abandoned altogether. Despite the problematics of such specialized, ghettoized vehicles for the circulation of African fiction, Sub-Saharan Francophone novelists fare no better in an unrestricted marketplace. Globalization as seen from Africa, Woodham argues, looks suspiciously akin to earlier phases of cultural colonialism. Not only are relatively few works translated, but individual writers are treated inconsistently at best, often failing to establish a long-term relationship with a single press, even when individual publications have proven relatively successful. The

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9 Casanova makes very similar observations with regard to especially the literary community of Great Britain. See Casanova, 167.
absence of a systematic approach to foreign materials by publishers, according to Woodham, means that globalization has not substantially benefited the circulation of these texts to date. Despite the industry’s self-proclaimed commitment to literary quality, the selection of books chosen for translation into English constructs a very different Sub-Saharan Francophone literary canon than that suggested by alternative sources.

Kenneth S.H. Liu’s comprehensive overview of English translations of Taiwanese fiction, presented in Chapter Eleven, brings a unique perspective to the collection. The very notion of “Taiwanese literature” is an articulation of Taiwan’s desire to be regarded as an independent nation-state. In a sense, the development of Taiwanese literary space and the entry of some of its authors into the global literary field is the perfect test case for Casanova’s model. In fact, Liu’s concluding sentence (“While struggling to establish the identity of Taiwan in politics, these translations contributed to constructing an independent identity for Taiwanese literature as well.”) could almost have come straight from Casanova’s book. Liu’s survey shows that translation trends shifted decisively from pro-unification works, glorifying the culture of the Chinese motherland, to pro-independence work, celebrating Taiwanese local colour. At the same time, however, Liu shows that the market for the translations is extremely limited, as most were published either in Taiwan itself or in small, non-commercial editions by US university presses. Liu examines as a case study the production and reception of a recent Columbia University Press series devoted in its entirety to Taiwanese literature.

In the final chapter of our collection, Ira Sarma surveys the fate of Hindi literature on the German market. The Indian publishing industry has become one of the world’s major producers of books over the last two decades and is set to grow more important still. Moreover, India’s publishing profile has radically changed in recent years, with publishing of Hindi books now increasingly taking precedence over English-language publishing. This expansion into Hindi (and other vernacular languages) is seen as set to grow as publishers seek to meet reader demand which is growing in line with the rest of the economy. However, in Germany, although the overall number of texts translated from Hindi and other Indian languages appears to have doubled, the total figure remains tiny – less than forty in 1986 and now less than ninety. Furthermore, the overall picture of Indian-origin literature is not representative. Distorting factors begin to operate even before selection. The first factor is that publishers will tend to choose texts published in English because they can vet them before embarking on the process. There is an absence of a systematic mechanism of text selection from minority languages and the texts that are offered tend to reflect whims or preferences of those on whom the publishers inevitably have to rely, usually academics. This tends to privilege one or two authors at the expense of others,
equally worthy of attention. It tends to result in the choice of worthy texts, rather than on what is being read. Publishers in Germany will tend to select texts that correspond to the tastes of the target readership and to the editorial profile of the publisher: novels are preferred to short stories and essays, even though the latter may be the most significant works in India. The result of these contradictions is that the process of selection and production tends to undermine the laudable aims with which the publishers set out and India’s literary production therefore remains badly represented and underrepresented in the western markets.

The global literary field emerging from the essays in this collection is a community wherein local, if not necessarily national, tastes and identities interact, merge or conflict with a set of dominant literary forms and values that continue to be perceived as broadly “Western” and that are linked with the Euro-American intellectual establishment, or with multinational publishing giants, or with both. As this field grows in size and becomes more complex, the task of making sense of it through academic research becomes more difficult, requiring scholars to move beyond familiar oppositions between the foreign and the domestic, the universal and the parochial. The various comparative approaches offered in this book will hopefully make a contribution to the development of new ways of reading, and writing about, literature on a global scale.
PART I

NATIONAL LITERATURES IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS
CHAPTER ONE

READING BETWEEN THE LINES:
SINGAPORE NOVELS IN A GLOBAL FRAME

PHILIP HOLDEN

There is a situation of reading which I now find myself in with increasing frequency: one might almost call it a primal scene of global literary consumption. I undo the packaging from amazon.com, or open the plastic bag from Kinokuniya, and I pick up a novel which is about Singapore, indeed in some important way of Singapore, and yet published elsewhere. In this particular case, the tired metaphor of the title, Shadow Theatre, is mirrored in a cover design in which the leather puppets from wayang kulit, the traditional Southeast Asian shadow theatre, are superimposed over two blurred Asian faces reduced to an eroticized anonymity of soft-focused eyes and lips. The blurb on the back cover promises a “lushly exotic story of mothers, daughters, friendship and tragedy,” “mythic timelessness,” contained in a “lovely and exotic novel” about contemporary Singapore. I open the cover and begin reading. I am surprised to learn in the attached “compiler’s note” that colonial rule ended in Singapore in 1955 “when Singapore became the only predominantly Chinese state in the Federation of Malaya.” In fact, the Federation of Malaya achieved independence in 1957, while Singapore did not achieve limited self-governance until 1959. As I move further into the text, I become a resisting reader, searching for further signs of inauthenticity which now come thick and fast.

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1 A slightly different version of this paper was published as “Histories of the Present: Reading Contemporary Singapore Novels between the Local and the Global,” Postcolonial Text 2, no. 2 (2006): http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/viewArticle/431. The paper is reproduced here with the permission of the editors of Postcolonial Text.
2 Fiona Cheong, Shadow Theatre (New York: Soho, 2002), xi.
Yet in the process of reading Fiona Cheong’s *Shadow Theatre*, I’m also dissatisfied with my own resistance to the text, and indeed my own assumed status as an expert in making a critical judgment regarding it. Cheong’s novel is one of a growing number of literary works written about Singapore which participate in a complex transnational politics of representation. Recent novels such as *Shadow Theatre*, Hwee Hwee Tan’s *Foreign Bodies* (1998) and *Mammon Inc.* (2002), Ming Cher’s *Spider Boys* (1995), Shirley Lim’s *Joss and Gold* (2002), Lau Siew Mei’s *Playing Madame Mao* (1999), Lydia Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence* (2002), and Vyvyane Loh’s *Breaking the Tongue* (2004) are the products of both their authors’ long residence in Singapore and their experience of expatriation. A critical practice that measures off their authenticity against an arbitrary standard is surely the worst form of parochialism, inevitably producing an inward-looking canon of Singapore Literature. Indeed, an insistence on a reading such texts through the lens of the nation-state seems particularly quixotic in Singapore itself, given its history of entanglement in global capital flows and its present status as the most (or, at worst the second-most) globalized country in the world. Is it possible to develop a critical practice that might disrupt both a parochial insistence on authenticity within a national context on the one hand, and a dehistoricized recuperation of Singapore—and by extension other “local”—texts into the categories of the Asian American, postcolonial, or diasporic on the other?

In approaching the question of such a situated reading, I want to avoid two potentially useful, but finally limiting frames of reference. The first is that of Orientalism. One could accuse many transnational Singaporean texts of Orientalism, much as Sheng-Mei Ma critiques Amy Tan as “a new Orientalist” for flaunting a romanticized chinoiserie to an American reading public. Yet merely reading texts for internal signs of Orientalism is a self-confirming strategy: any representation of cultural alterity is potentially readable as Orientalist, and such analyses often seem to me to be unconsciously reliant on unacknowledged *a priori* judgments of the text’s political worth. The second frame is Graham Huggan’s notion of the “postcolonial exotic.” Huggan’s discussion of the manner in which postcolonial texts are consumed in Europe and North America is useful in its consideration of both internal textual and external social constraints: careful attention to the novels of Arundhati Roy or

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3 Any measure of globalization is, of course, subjective. One measure on which Singapore frequently finishes either first or second among all nation-states is total trade expressed as a percentage of GDP. See Tommy Koh, “Size is not Destiny,” in *Singapore: Re-engineering Success*, ed. Arun Mahizhnan and Lee Tsao Yuan (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998), 172-87.

Salman Rushdie is matched by the consideration of institutions such as the Booker Prize and the Heinemann African writers series. Yet in flitting from social to textual readings, it seems to me that Huggan’s analysis of the postcolonial exotic frequently becomes circular. The reception of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, in Huggan’s account, indicates that it was frequently read as an exotic spectacle by a Western audience. Yet, if we look closer, Rushdie is clearly aware of this possibility, and parodies the “metropolitan […] reader-as-consumer.”5 And yet again, in a further twist, Rushdie’s “meta-exotism,” Huggan argues, is reliant on the skill with which he can “manipulate commercially viable commercial codes.”6 In this kind of reading, any postcolonial text is thus simultaneously hegemonic and counter-hegemonic.

To escape from this labyrinth of interpretation, we can usefully turn to two conceptual tools, the first from a brief essay by David Palumbo-Liu. Writing in response to Shirley Lim and Amy Ling’s edited collection *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, Palumbo-Liu welcomes the focus on American ethnic literatures that such essay collections and anthologies have encouraged from the 1990s onwards, in parallel with an increased attention to the postmodern and the postcolonial. However, a premature conflation of ethnicity with the postmodern and the postcolonial, Palumbo-Liu notes, is likely to do both theory and text a disservice. The most interesting readings of ethnic literatures will be generated by recognizing “static or interference” between theoretical frameworks such as postcolonialism and postmodernism rather than in “uncritical applications of theory to text.”7 In particular, such readings should enable us to historicize postmodernism and postcolonialism themselves, rather than inscribing a trajectory in which “history is tracked toward a rendezvous with postmodern aesthetics” and is then dematerialized in the present.8

Palumbo-Liu’s brief comments may be glossed by reference to a concept which has been gaining currency in political science in the last decade, perhaps most influentially in the work of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor: the social imaginary. For Taylor, a social imaginary exists as a space in between social practice and formal theories of knowledge, “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the

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6 Huggan, 81.
8 Palumbo-Liu, 163.
deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations." I’d like to argue that while as academics we would like to think that we work at the level of formal theory, we often work following transnational social imaginaries. Thus while individual academics themselves may frequently show great self-awareness and indeed elaborate self-reflexivity in critical practice, reading practices involving texts in postcolonial and diasporic frames often “make sense” to a reader because they are unconsciously reliant on transnational social imaginaries which tend to read out the static and interference that the local provides. Restoring such static and interference thus has the power to question and ultimately deepen critical practice.

In this light, my essay will consider three novels, Fiona Cheong’s *Shadow Theatre*, Vyvyane Loh’s *Breaking the Tongue*, and Shirley Lim’s *Joss and Gold*, which are commonly read outside Singapore as Asian American or postcolonial texts. In each novel Singapore is an allegorical space central to the narrative’s process of making meaning. In Cheong’s novel, Singapore is a realm representative of a Lacanian imaginary order, a place of fluid narration and signification before the intervention of the *nom du père*. In Loh’s, it is an arena in which the colonized subject may struggle to reclaim an essential Chineseness. In Lim’s narrative, Singapore is a globalized metropolis which embodies both the possibilities and contradictions of Asian modernities in a new millennium. Reading these novels through the interference generated by Singaporean presents and pasts allows us to take a new perspective on the novels themselves, and also ultimately to think through the latent content of transnational social imaginaries, to contemplate and to model a situated practice of reading transnational texts which takes into account the contexts of their consumption and production, and which offers larger possibilities beyond the frameworks of national or postcolonial literatures.

Fiona Cheong’s *Shadow Theatre* is a fragmentary, self-referential narrative which is set in an upper middle-class landed property estate in Singapore in 1994, although characters’ memories frequently take us back many years before the narrative present.

Framed by the compiler’s note discussed above and a glossary, the text represents itself as a series of fragmentary accounts by witnesses of events in the estate during August 1994 which centre around the return of Shakilah Nair, daughter of one of the residents, from America. Shakilah has returned to Singapore after over a decade’s absence, pregnant, yet refusing to explain her pregnancy. Her story becomes woven with that of other characters, stories of same-sex love, rape, incest, and the mysterious disappearance of the sister of one of the estate’s residents. The voices we hear are all of women within

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familial networks in which men are either dead or absent. The narration of the first character, for instance, is introduced as that of “Susannah Wang, daughter of Kenneth and Alice Wang, father deceased.” Often reporting the actions and thoughts of others at second or even third hand, these miniature narratives produce a collage of voices which never quite adds up to a coherent picture. Cheong’s novel also gestures towards magical realism, since the world of the women is haunted by the presence of ghosts who hover on the borders of the visible.

At first sight, Cheong’s novel might seem a welcome feminist intervention which successfully problematizes the paternalist “state fatherhood” of contemporary Singapore. The novel is women-centred, and the lives of the female characters in the text escape the demands upon women in contemporary Singapore to carry the burden of the preservation of “traditional values” on the one hand and, through success in the public domain, to provide a benchmark of Singapore’s modernity on the other. Furthermore, the novel features fully developed characters of different races, moving beyond the racially confined worlds or racial stereotyping of much Singaporean fiction. A refusal of the fixity of racial categories, indeed, is central to *Shadow Theatre*: Valerie Nair who, from her name, might be identified as Indian, is actually Chinese, having married an Indian man. The state management of ethnicity in Singapore ascribes a “race” to each individual, following the racial designation of his or her father: this categorization is marked on most official identity documents and will dictate important elements in the construction of self such as the second language studied at school. Moments of racial indeterminacy in Cheong’s text challenge this framework. Finally, unlike many contemporary Singaporean texts, Cheong’s narrative includes passages focalized through the perspective of foreign domestic workers—“maids”—who are not Singaporean, thus providing possibilities of empathy and a recognition of the way in which racial and gendered differentials in power inform the everyday.

Despite these possibilities, however, Cheong’s is ultimately a novel which produces Singapore as a space in opposition to North America, and thus fails to engage with the representational “static” generated by contemporary Singapore.

10 Cheong, 3.
Despite its postmodern form, the novel is grounded on unexamined notions of authenticity and an unproblematized ability to speak for Asia, for Singapore. This authenticity is first established by paratextual elements: the historical “compiler’s note” mentioned above, for instance, and a glossary of “Singlish, the English vernacular of Singaporeans.”13 The glossary itself is presented in the formal style of a dictionary—the entry for “chiku,” for instance, is “n. 1. Manilkara zapota, commonly known as the sapodilla, a tree cultivated throughout the tropical regions of the world. 2. the fruit of this plant”14—and the effect of this formality is surely to authenticate the text to a reader with little knowledge of Singapore. As the reader enters the text itself, other markers of authenticity are displayed. The text uses Malay words, and attempts to represent the speech patterns of Singapore English. In a further strategy, the metafictional elements of the novel serve to produce it as a representatively Singaporean or Asian text in opposition to North America. Thus Shakilah herself is writing a novel which has “too many voices” in her American publisher’s eyes: she refuses to “cut the book down to three voices at the most,” despite having “run into the same problem with most American publishers.”15 Having heard Shakilah’s complaints, one of Cheong’s characters wonders why “more than three voices” are “so difficult to follow,”16 and then asks “Don’t Americans know how to pay attention to several people talking at one time? They should just come sit at a dinner table over here.”17

Such textual claims of authenticity can, of course, be challenged. The representation of speech in a literary text is always mediated, but having, through the glossary, claimed a transparent ability to represent “Singlish,” Cheong leaves herself open for critique. While Malay and Hokkien vocabulary items are used correctly in terms of denotation, the dialogue in Shadow Theatre is clearly a symbolic representation of, rather than an attempt at accurate transcription of, colloquial Singapore English: there is, for instance, an overuse of the final particle “lah” and a misunderstanding of Malay-influenced word ordering.18 Yet Cheong’s use of English is symptomatic of a more fundamental

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13 Cheong, 235.
14 Ibid., 236.
15 Ibid., 21.
16 Ibid., 21-22.
17 Ibid., 21-22.
18 Colloquial Singapore English features a variety of final particles, such as lah, hor, and meh which, like their equivalents in Chinese languages, add emphasis and shades of meaning. Cheong overuses only one of them, lah, which is often stereotypically taken as representative of “Singlish.” Phrases such as “itu woman, she kept complaining” (5) are not representative of what someone in Singapore would actually say, since in Malay adjectives follow the noun: thus “perumpuan itu” (that woman) or possibly “woman itu”
claim of representation in the text. Singapore is, in Cheong’s portrayal, everything that America is not. It is a feminine space, a site of hauntings, of magic (and magical realism), and of polyvocal narratives—in a sense it is simultaneously premodern and postmodern. Perhaps, Rose Sim speculates, “the Srivijaya and Majapahit women” from ancient Southeast Asian empires have “opened a window between” the spirit world and the world of contemporary Singapore.19 In an earlier scene, Rose condemns the “foreigner” Jason Hill for imagining that the world of ghosts is “just a figment of our imagination” 20 Singapore in this text is an aesthetic object of intricate design, a “complicated and interwoven” piece of batik.21

The creation of Singapore as utopic space of postmodern play may well represent an important intervention for the North American reading community that Shadow Theatre addresses. However, when historicized within the context of contemporary Singapore, the novel has much less that is significant to say. The central difficulty of Cheong’s representation of Singapore as America’s Other is that it is unable to imagine or engage with the most striking element of the city-state to even a newly-arrived visitor: its evident modernity. The novel, indeed, rails against “modern Singaporeans with advanced technological tastes and impatient minds” who have invaded the central characters’ neighbourhood.22 Little work is performed on the estate, the central characters making occasional excursions to the National Library and, more frequently, visiting each other. Even Cheong’s domestic workers, implausibly, spend much of their time playing scrabble, and it is thus perhaps understandable that one of the American reviews quoted on the rear cover of the paperback edition

(although this is unlikely). The issue of accurate representation is, of course, to some degree subjective. Some studies of the accuracy of representation of Singapore English in fiction have been unsophisticated, in that they do not allow the possibility that the writer is using a synthetic interlanguage to represent speech in languages other than English as, for example, Ming Cher attempts in his novel Spider Boys (Auckland: Penguin, 1995). However, the paratextual elements of Cheong’s novel claim authentic representation, and it is thus arguable that Shadow Theatre should be evaluated on these grounds. For accounts of the representation of Singapore English see Peter K.W. Tan, “Speech Presentation in Singaporean English Novels,” World Englishes 1, no.3 (1999): 359-72, and Anthea Fraser Gupta, “Marketing the Voice of Authenticity: a Comparison of Ming Cher and Rex Shelley,” Language and Literature 9 (2000): 150–69. Ismail Talib in The Language of Postcolonial Literatures: An Introduction (London: Routledge, 2002) places frequent references to Singapore in the more general framework of language use in postcolonial literatures.

19 Cheong, 197.
20 Ibid., 65.
21 Ibid., 24.
22 Ibid., 6.
imagines that the novel is “seen through the eyes of the women of a small village.”

Yet in contemporary Singapore narratives of modernity have not yet ended, despite the buffeting they have received since 1997 in a series of economic setbacks: the Asian economic crisis of 1997-1998, the stock market collapse of early 2000, and the 2003 SARS epidemic. Singapore’s cultural and social landscape are saturated with signs of other modernities, held up as objects of desire: Japanese popular music and fashion, Korean soap operas dubbed into Mandarin, Dutch banks, American seminars on entrepreneurship and self-help books. The framework of the Singapore modern contains many of the sites of struggle within the city-state: the growth of civil society, the increasing visibility of queer culture, changes in gender roles, debates on the use of language. Historicizing the present in Singapore thus involves more than a fetishization of the pre-colonial as always already postmodern: rather, it should invoke an exploration of the way that tradition is reinvented and circulated as a sign in disputes over the nature of modernity itself. In this process of historicization postmodernist techniques and forms may well have an important place, and indeed many writers and artists in Singapore have made cogent use of them to defamiliarize the present. Yet in Cheong’s text Singapore and America are temporally separate: a postmodern Singapore is produced as the object of desire for a modern American reading public. In a sense, we have here an inversion of Johannes Fabian’s notion of “allochronic discourse.” Like Fabian’s anthropology, Cheong’s novel places its subjects in “another Time” from that of the implied author and the implied reader, eliding the fact that the novel actually mediates between these two spaces. For all Shadow Theatre’s complexity, its self-referentiality, Singapore in Cheong’s novel is simply an “Other” space.

Vyvyane Loh’s Breaking the Tongue is a first novel of considerable promise. Unlike Cheong’s, it is presented to the reader primarily as a Chinese American, rather than an Asian American text, with Loh’s own name given in Chinese.

23 The foremost example of this is the allegorical theatre of Singaporean playwright, Kuo Pao Kun. In plays such as Kuo’s Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral (first performed in 1995) the historical figure Zheng He, admiral in command of Ming Dynasty expeditions to Southeast Asia, is used to question the social fabric of contemporary Singapore, the play’s protagonist becoming convinced that he and Zheng He are “related, closely related—so closely related that I had to be a descendant of the eunuch admiral.” See Kuo Pao Kun, Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun: Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral and The Spirits Play, ed. C. J. W.-L. Wee and Lee Chee Keng (Singapore: SNP, 2003), 38.

characters on the dust jacket and title pages, and the titles of the individual sections given in both English and in Chinese script.\(^{25}\) Loh’s text also resolutely refuses to produce Singapore as an exotic space, and the novel is, indeed, carefully historicized. Loh’s protagonist, the teenage English-speaking Straits-born Chinese Claude Lim, experiences the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in 1942, in the process having his faith in British imperialism and his own identity as a colonial mimic man irrevocably shattered. Through his association with a young woman leftist activist Han Ling-li, who is eventually brutally tortured by the Japanese, he rediscovers his essential Chineseness and reclaims his Chinese identity. The novel features a double narrative, in which a chronological account of Claude’s adolescence and family conflicts moves inexorably towards interpolated scenes of his own interrogation by the Japanese in the narrative present. In the final section of the novel, Claude is released by his captors into a Japanese-occupied Singapore. He re-establishes a connection with Ling-li through a vision in which she describes her torture to him, and in which they converse not in English, but in Chinese. The triumphalism of Claude’s acquisition of a purified Chinese identity is, however, undercut by a final vision, in which Claude tears out his tongue from his mouth, yet knows that “no miraculous new tongue will sprout in the old one’s place”; at best, he will only possess “a muteness [...], a stunted form of speech,” although he will be happy that his children “will not be contaminated by that old tongue.”\(^{26}\)

In an Asian American context, such a retrieval of memory through grafting of oneself to new histories has a certain power. Loh’s novel may well open up possibilities of historicization of the present within an American context by suggesting the complexity of the category Chinese American, and by resisting an easy celebration of the hybridity of colonial subjects. Within a Singapore context, however, the novel is doxological. Its historiographical framework is that of the first generation of Singaporean nationalism, and it reiterates discourses which have informed Singapore governmentality since independence, which have increasingly been contested by Singapore fiction, theatre and poetry within the last decade.

The contours of the discourses in which *Breaking the Tongue* participates can perhaps first be mapped by considering the intertexts and historical material which inform the novel. Loh’s account of the fall of Singapore is heavily reliant on Peter Elphick’s *Singapore: the Pregnable Fortress* and *Odd Man Out*, historical accounts which emphasize the British as actors. The author has also looked at a National Archives of Singapore pictorial publication about the

\(^{25}\) The one exception is section six, “Breaking the Tongue,” where the Chinese characters given are 精忠報國, the patriotic inscription on the Song dynasty general Yue Fei’s back.