



Interventions

International Journal of Postcolonial Studies

ISSN: 1369-801X (Print) 1469-929X (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrij20>

The Americanization of World Literature?

Pieter Vermeulen & Amélie Hurkens

To cite this article: Pieter Vermeulen & Amélie Hurkens (2019): The Americanization of World Literature?, Interventions, DOI: [10.1080/1369801X.2019.1659166](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2019.1659166)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2019.1659166>



Published online: 26 Sep 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 10



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

THE AMERICANIZATION OF WORLD LITERATURE?

American Independent Publishing and the World
Literary Vernacular

Pieter Vermeulen ^a and Amélie Hurkens ^b

^aAmerican and Comparative Literature, University of Leuven, Belgium;

^bAmerican Literature, Uppsala University, Sweden

.....
contemporary literature
history of the book
independent publishers
translation
world literature
.....
As American publishing conglomerates and institutions have come to play an increasingly dominant role in world literature, dominant critical discourses tend to equate the “Americanization” of world literature with a process of aesthetic diminishment and devernacularization. This essay nuances and complements such accounts by focusing on the role of American independent publishers as curators of world literature. The “world literary vernacular” through which these presses construct world literary value contains five key elements: an insistence on modernist literary genealogies; an emphasis on regional (or at least subnational) attachments; an investment in oeuvres rather than in individual works or personal charisma as salient units of literary value; a decidedly unironic rhetoric that connects literature to a putative world republic of letters; and finally an emphasis on translatedness and the creative values of translation. The essay situates independent publishers as crucial participants in the contemporary world literature ecology.

Against devernacularization as Americanization

In a recent essay on Irish writer Mike McCormack’s novel *Solar Bones*, a fairly experimental yet relatively successful novel written in one unceasing sentence formatted only by line breaks, Jeanne-Marie Jackson (2017) ponders the distinction between mass-market global novels and works, like *Solar Bones*, which manage to be “substantively transnational *and* accomplished” without surrendering their local particularity. *Solar Bones*, Jackson writes, is characterized by “an obvious measure of formal risk-taking”, and it is “unprofitably committed to local untranslatability”. Jackson codes formal singularity as a commendable resistance to facile circulation and consumption. This argument is a familiar one in world literature studies: critics like Emily Apter (2013) locate literary value in a resistance to translatability and promote untranslatables as “hubs of singularity” that resist circulation in the global literary marketplace (33). It is vital for Jackson’s argument, then, that McCormack’s novel is published by a small press (Dublin’s Tramp Press), as it is freedom from commercial constraints that allows *Solar Bones* to be more formally interesting than, for instance, equally transnational but formally unexciting novels like Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* or *TransAtlantic*. Not interested in interrogating their own formal commitments, McCann’s novels are fairly generic novel-seeming goods rather than challenging literary works.

Jackson’s essay provides a good starting point for our discussion, not least because it condenses a dominant position in discussions over the affordances and limitations of world literature in (or translated into) English. While world literary circulation in different languages, or even in non-western Anglophone contexts, such as that of India (Gupta 2015; Wiemann 2014), present different stories, our essay is primarily an intervention in discussions over the role of US-based institutions in the mediation of world literature. Jackson’s essay maps the distinction between mass-market and small-scale publishing onto that between processes of devernacularization on the one hand and a commitment to vernacular specificity on the other. In the same gesture, it equates commercialization and devernacularization with aesthetic impoverishment. This set of oppositions has become a familiar feature in discussions of world literature. It informs, for instance, Tim Parks’ (2010) disgruntled attacks on “the dull new global novel”: written in a rootless literary Esperanto, the mass-market global novel dismisses vernacular elements as so much “culture-specific clutter and linguistic virtuosity” that market forces want to see removed as barriers to global consumption. From the opposite angle, the equation of commercialization, devernacularization, and aesthetic diminishment also informs the insistence on untranslatability (as in the work of Emily Apter) that positions aesthetic value in singular acts of resistance against global circulation.

Commodification, devernacularization, aesthetic reduction: we want to add a fourth term to the equation by noting that these anxieties often come together under the rubric of “Americanization” (Vermeulen 2017). Indeed, one of the most prevalent complaints about world literature is that it is increasingly being routed through US-based – and most often New York-based – institutions. This apprehensiveness pertains to literary products, which are increasingly being published by imprints of the so-called Big Five publishers (Hachette, Harper Collins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon and Schuster), all of which have their US headquarters in New York. Yet it also goes for world literature’s academic delivery systems, such as the Norton and Longman anthologies and the Institute for World Literature, which is based at Harvard. If Pascale Casanova, back in 1999, famously identified Paris as the capital of the world republic of letters, New York has inherited that role in the twenty-first century. Indeed, Casanova (2004, 74, 171) intuited as much, and she did not fail to describe this shift as a process of trivialization and devernacularization. The result, she feared, would be “the marketing of products intended for rapid, ‘de-nationalized’ circulation”, and a shift to “products based on tested aesthetic formulas and designed to appeal to the widest possible readership”.

This essay challenges this equation of commercialization, devernacularization, Americanization, and aesthetic diminishment on both theoretical and empirical grounds. We can return to Jackson’s essay, and to its opposition between McCormack (vernacular, literary, good) and McCann (global, banal, bad), to see the terms of debate being destabilized. It so happens that *Solar Bones* was “Americanized” – that is, published in the United States – nine months after Jackson’s essay. As Jackson would have predicted, the US edition is published by an independent publisher: the Manhattan-based Soho Press. What is more interesting is that the book is blurbed by none other than Colum McCann. As an Irishman living in New York, McCann is of course perfectly situated to serve as an ambassador for Irish writing in America, but it is remarkable that McCann’s mass-market affiliation – as an author who is himself published by Penguin Random House – is apparently not seen as a blemish on the press’s more rarified reputation. Mass-market success and niche appeal, it seems, do not exclude one another. This less than antagonistic state of affairs is also illustrated by the widely publicized case of Elena Ferrante: a writer achieving mass-market success and being castigated for the very accessibility and ease of her style but still being published by an independent publisher (Europa Editions) and achieving critical recognition in the pages of New York-based media, most influentially in James Wood’s essay from the *New Yorker* (Vermeulen 2017).

In isolation, the publishing history of *Solar Bones* is an admittedly trivial example, yet it does allow us to anticipate the more serious point that the equation of conglomerization, devernacularization, Americanization, and

literary regression does not quite hold. Two things seem especially relevant. First, the conglomerization of the publishing industry has not only resulted in the relentless pursuit of mass-market blockbusters (say, the next Dan Brown or the next *Fifty Shades of Gray*), but has actually resulted in a proliferation of different niches, of which formally challenging fiction is one (Sinykin 2017). Even Amazon Publishing (APub), which has in recent years become easily the biggest engine for literary translations into English, has its own imprint for quality translated fiction named Amazon Crossing. Gisèle Sapiro (2015) has called this the “literary upmarket” segment – a segment in which we find authors like, for instance, Karl-Ove Knausgaard and Roberto Bolaño, whose *oeuvres* are widely recognized as having world literary value, and which are both distributed through mainstream publishers (after having first been published in the United States through independent presses like Archipelago Books and New Directions). When Jackson writes that mainstream novels do not pause to interrogate the viability of their own formal choices, while “an ideal small press novel is one that takes seriously the question of what a novel, rather than a film or an image, can do best”, this does not account for *oeuvres*, like those of Knausgaard and Bolaño, or indeed Ferrante, which are positively obsessed with the affordances and liabilities of the literary.

A second point is that “Americanization” is not quite the same as a wholesale commercialization and trivialization, for the simple reason that America is not a frictionless conduit for capital and commodities, but an environment with values, habits, and practices of its own. Rather than outright devernacularization, then, “Americanization” names an encounter of different vernaculars. Take, as a fairly trivial example again, McCann’s blurb for *Solar Bones*: McCann writes that “with stylistic gusto, and in rare, spare, precise and poetic prose, Mike McCormack gets to the music of what is happening all around us”. While the first part of this statement foregrounds the stylistic and literary qualities of the book, the second, connecting the novel to “the music of what is happening all around us”, in its upbeat sentimentality, points less to devernacularized abstraction than to a peculiarly American sensibility (even if this sensibility, of course, is not shared by all vernaculars that make up the US culture). Indeed, as we will show, such an elevated and slightly sentimental rhetoric is endemic to what we will call the world literary vernacular curated by American independent publishers.

The rest of this essay aims to revise a dominant narrative of world literary regression by beginning to describe a particular world literary vernacular. The next section engages with recent theories of the vernacular to theorize such a world literary vernacular, while the rest of the essay reports on our study of the ways in which a salient sample of American independent publishers give expression to world literary value. We distinguish five main features of such a vernacular articulation of world literary value: an insistence on modernist

literary genealogies; an emphasis on regional (or at least subnational) attachments; an investment in *oeuvres* rather than in individual works or personal charisma as salient units of literary value; a decidedly unironic rhetoric that connects literature to a putative world republic of letters; and finally an emphasis on translatedness and the creative values of translation. If mainstream publishers downplay these five elements, we argue that a consideration of American independent publishers as curators of world literature enriches our understanding of the world literature ecology and makes “Americanization” visible as a narrative of ongoing reorganization rather than unidirectional decline.

Toward a world literary vernacular

A world literary vernacular is a vernacular that is not just defined through its resistance to global circulation (like Apter’s “untranslatable”), but participates in that circulation, and would be unthinkable without it. In his book *Forget English!*, Aamir Mufti focuses on the colonial career of English. For Mufti, the global spread of English did not replace the vernacular, but rather enabled a process of “vernacularization” in which local languages became visible as vernacular for the first time. The vernacular, for Mufti, is not world literature’s other but an effect of the dialectic of vernacularization and cosmopolitanization that makes up the dynamic of world literary circulation. “The very modes of conceiving of vernacularity and indigeneity”, Mufti (2016, 96) writes, “are products of the colonial process”. The spread of English installs a kind of grid, a plane of equivalence through which different vernaculars become comparable, and the very idea of what this special issue calls “world literary unevenness” becomes thinkable; it imposes a kind of standard that “renders legible *as literature* a vast and heterogeneous range of practices of writing” (11). Orientalism, which for Mufti was crucial for the institution of world literature, functions as “a set of processes for the reorganization of language, literature, and culture on a planetary scale that effected the assimilation of heterogeneous and dispersed bodies of writing onto the plane of equivalence and evaluability that is (world) literature” (145).

While Mufti’s book deals especially with the literary situation in India, we think that his take on vernacularization as an effect of world literary circulation, rather than as an illusory pristine condition preceding it, is instructive for understanding the anxieties surrounding the “Americanization” of world literature. Mufti shows how the role of English as what he calls, in a remarkable turn of phrase, a “global literary vernacular” shapes rather than erodes the vernacular (17); the vernacular’s aura of authenticity, indigeneity, and locality

is an effect of culture's participation in global circuits of circulation, not a last refuge against it. English, like the economic infrastructures captured under the rubric of Americanization, serves "as a cultural system with global reach, not simply [as] a transparent medium but an assemblage and apparatus" that renders practices of writing "onto the plane of equivalence and evaluability" (17, 145). The terms "equivalence" and "evaluability" are important in this context that is not *merely* economic. In a context in which the relation between economic and cultural capital is far from stable, these terms need not invoke the uniform wastelands of capitalist globalization. Indeed, is it not the case that the discourse of Americanization-as-aesthetic-erosion – initiated by Casanova but still current in, for instance, Pheng Cheah's (2016) recent contributions to world literary thinking – thrives on a confusion between a plane of equivalence and a condition of wholesale homogenization? Mufti's account of the equivalence between languages implies neither that these languages are the same nor that only one of them counts as vernacular. What it does imply is comparability, and a need actively to establish and curate distinctions that are never naturally given. Rather, they only become thinkable within the matrix of an Americanized world literary field. While this matrix does not exhaust the reality of world literature, we submit that an understanding of these distinctions enriches an all too homogenizing account of the field.

Within an Americanized world literary field, then, we want to trace the features of a world literary vernacular – a particular idiolect for curating world literary value. Such curation occurs in a context of global delivery systems in which the value of the literary is as little guaranteed as the value of cultural difference. Jackson remarks that accounts of the circulation of world literature are impoverished by their blindness to "the thriving counter-sphere of independent presses". Indeed, if, as we believe, the relation between this "counter-sphere" and large publishing conglomerates is less antagonistic than Jackson thinks, the ways independent presses curate world literature and cultivate a world literary vernacular become all the more relevant for an understanding of the role of US-based institutions in the world literary ecology. Sheldon Pollock (2000, 607), one of the most incisive historians and theorists of the relation between cosmopolitanism and the vernacular, defines "vernacularity" as language "characterized by a full if sometimes anxiety-ridden awareness of affiliation to a domain of literary communication that is finite". It seems clear, then, that the term also applies to the discourse that curates the world literary niche within world literary space, in full awareness that that niche will never colonize the broader literary field, but only ever be a repository of vernaculars. It seems clear, in other words, that this niche has its own world literary vernacular. It is this vernacular that the rest of this essay aims to describe.

Sampling the world literary vernacular

Sampling such a world literary vernacular requires a number of methodological choices – which is to say, a number of inevitable limitations. Independent publishers hardly figure in prominent delivery algorithms such as Barnes & Noble’s Book Graph Recommendations or the *New York Times* bestseller lists. And not only are they less visible, their visibility is also more distributed: the Best Translated Book Award, for instance, shortlisted books from no less than sixty-six publishers in the last decade, making even the field of successful publishers considerably harder to map than the conglomerized field of the Big Five. Indeed, as John Thompson (2010) has noted, “the rise of large publishing corporations has gone hand in hand with the proliferation of small publishing operations” (153). Of these sixty-six, the two most famous are probably New Directions and Dalkey Archive. To get a larger sense of these small publishing operations, we have not only sampled this list of sixty-six presses, but also probed the digital database of independent literary publishers provided by the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP), which is intent on “ensur[ing] a vibrant, diverse literary landscape by helping small literary publishers work better”. William Marling (2016) points out that “in the system that prevails today, the large presses depend on a group of specialty presses that publish literature in translation” (155) – he mentions Dalkey Archive, Granta Books, Portobello Books, New York Review Books, Europa Editions, Archipelago, Melville House, Open Letter, Seven Stories, Northwestern University Press, American University Press in Cairo, and World Literature Today. In absolute numbers, these presses consistently produce more translations than the Big Five combined (155).

Seeing that the CLMP comprises hundreds of small publishers, we have narrowed our selection by looking at publishers that explicitly position themselves as curators of world literature: we selected those publishing houses whose mission statements advertise a preoccupation with translation and accentuate the translatedness of world literary products, and adopt a rhetoric of world literature, often even invoking Casanova’s notion of a world republic of letters. In search of a world literary vernacular, we have made a qualitative comparison of the discourse used by some twelve presses that seem to make up the core of the category of world literary curators. We have looked, on the one hand, at the epi- and peritexts these presses avail themselves of to publicize their specific publications: book descriptions, snippets of reviews featured on the web pages of particular publications, blurbs by other authors or literary authorities, bios of authors as well as their translators, and the texts featured on the publications’ covers. On the other hand, we have surveyed the language these presses draw on when they are moving the promotional accent to themselves in their mission statements, news sections, or advertisements for events they host. We have also paid attention to other

textual and visual materials that serve to profile the publishing houses themselves, such as the designs of their websites.

A qualitative and comparative analysis of these data allowed us to capture the key features of the world literary vernacular that characterizes this niche of American independent publishing. As these features were most conspicuous in seven of the twelve publishers we had initially selected, the rest of this essay focuses on these seven: Archipelago, Coffee House Press, Deep Vellum, Europa Editions, Graywolf, Open Letter, and Two Lines Press – which all seem to have adopted the world literary vernacular as their first language. Two Dollar Radio, Melville House, Soho, New Directions, and Dalkey Archive are five slightly more peripheral members of the category than these seven. New Directions and Dalkey Archive can be said to form the “(Not so) Big Two” of the independent literary publishing industry, and their focus on world literary curatorship is blunted by several other ambitions that also form part of their overdetermined role in the American publishing ecology, while presses like Two Dollar Radio, Melville House, and Soho are less committed to a rhetoric of world literary citizenship than the seven presses we retained.

Of course, the main features of the literary vernacular we present in the next section are not unique to these seven presses, nor do the five features we identify exhaust the world literary vernacular. Our aim is not strict demarcation, but rather an exploratory description of the key elements in the vernacular that operates within a broadly recognized niche for world literary publishing. We have chosen to describe these elements on the basis of a qualitative analysis of the seven case studies that emerged as most typical. We consider this world literary vernacular, in other words, as a category with fairly strict borders which is internally marked by very fuzzy boundaries between typical and more peripheral cases. A description of typical cases throws light on rather than excludes more peripheral instances that also, to different extents, “speak” this world literary vernacular. Yet, as the many examples in the following delineation of the world literary vernacular’s principal properties will evince, it is the seven independent presses on which this delineation hinges that we distinguish as the vernacular’s main speakers.

While the next section elaborates these five features in more detail, we can briefly look at one example – that of the writer Sergio Pitol – to illustrate how they intersect in the world literary consecration of one author. Pitol, who died in 2018, was a Mexican writer who, as Casanova’s world literature model would predict, was first consecrated in the Spanish-speaking world (he won the Juan Rulfo Prize in 1999 and the Cervantes Prize in 2005). Only in 2015 did indie publisher Deep Vellum begin to market Pitol as a writer of world literature status, the press overtly congratulating itself on launching “the first appearance of any of Pitol’s books in English” with its publication of Pitol’s *The Trilogy of Memory*. Pitol is presented as a cosmopolitan figure,

who combines the activities of writer, translator, and diplomat, a combination that makes him an ideal citizen of the world republic of letters (the first feature we outline below). Pitol's cosmopolitanism takes shape as a string of attachments to different places, with mentions of residences in Rome, Beijing, Barcelona, Xalapa, Bristol, Warsaw, Budapest, Paris, Moscow, Prague. This is a string of locations to which Deep Vellum's "vibrant literary community in the Dallas community" provides, for now, the last stop (such subnational attachments are the third point we elaborate below). Translation is presented as a creative activity in its own right, while the translation into English, as we have mentioned earlier, is cast as an important cultural event (this will be the second feature we look at). It is also significant that Pitol is the translator of Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Witold Gombrowicz, not only because these authors are famously transnational figures, but also because they belong to a modernist canon that, more often than not, testifies to literary value in the world literary vernacular (this will be the fourth feature below). Pitol is explicitly situated in this tradition: "A unique, timeless, international literary voice in the mold of Henry James, Thomas Mann, and Jorge Luis Borges, Pitol's work has been translated into more than ten languages". The focus on "voice" and "work" in this last formulation, rather than on the person of Pitol, is equally vital. It exemplifies how notions like voice, style, and *oeuvre* are typically more important than the individual writer or the individual work (the fifth feature below) – an emphasis that is also apparent in the fact that Pitol's translation into English takes the shape of a trilogy rather than a single work. The last volume in the trilogy is cast as "the grand magnum opus crowning his timeless literary career", while the interest in Pitol's short stories (*Mephisto's Waltz: Selected Short Stories*) is said to derive from the insight it affords in "the evolution of his unique literary style". The discursive promotion of Pitol, as we will see, is an exemplary case of the vernacular the seven publishing houses adopt to when calling attention to their world literary products.

The world literary vernacular: five features

First and foremost, the world literary discourse deployed by independent publishers recycles the rhetoric of the *world republic of letters*. Reaching out to a transnational community of readers, American independent publishing houses articulate world literary value through an unironic discourse of cosmopolitanism, and champion an interconnection that bridges the gap between nations and cultures. According to Thompson (2010), the field occupied by small publishers is one not dictated by a sense of rivalry and competitiveness, since these publishers, on the contrary, "see themselves as part of a common

vocation and shared mission. Their competitive rivalries are overshadowed by the affinities that stem from their common sense of purpose” (156) – a purpose that, to a large extent, amounts to the production of a world literary citizenship. This ideal is, quite literally, visualized by the banner of a vintage world map on top of Archipelago’s homepage, asking for support to “help us pay writers, translators, and discover new voices from around the world”. The mission statement of the press echoes this purpose, pledging itself to the “increase [of a] cross-pollination between readers, writers, thinkers, and educators across borders”. Another concretization of the world republic of letters can be found on the website of Europa Editions, which pictures a globe, with different colours for every continent, grouping all of the publisher’s books by continent of origin. Europa Editions’ idealistic mission statement expresses the wish to foster a “dialogue between nations and cultures [which] is of vital importance”. And moreover, “this exchange is facilitated by literature chosen not only for its ability to entertain and fascinate but also to inform and enlighten”. In other words, as an originally Italian press expanded to the United States, Europa Editions have taken up a kind of “European Man’s Burden”, ordained “to bring fresh international voices to the American and British markets”.

In addition to its markedly idealistic undertone, the world literary vocabulary is specified by two ubiquitous keywords: “community” and “connection”. Coffee House Press, for instance, envisions a future “where a publisher is a catalyst and connector”. Deep Vellum seeks to “forge a stronger connection between English-language readers and the rest of the world”. Graywolf, for its part, presents itself as “a community of authors, editors, readers, and donors who are brought together by a shared love of great books and a belief that diverse voices and opinions need to be represented in the world of letters”. The vocabulary of the world republic of letters has also penetrated the language Two Lines Press uses to promote their world literature programme, Poetry Inside Out: “By practicing the art of translation, students become familiar with the building blocks of language and the full range of expression available to them as readers, writers, speakers, poets, thinkers, and world citizens”. Community, connection, and world citizenship: this is less the vocabulary of an abstract, devernacularized space than a particular inflection of an American vernacular.

A world republic of letters entails the exchange of those letters beyond national borders, and thus often necessitates translation. It is therefore not surprising that the discourse of global citizenship is closely interwoven with the second feature of this world literary vernacular, namely, the conspicuous foregrounding of the *translatedness* of world literary products. In their almost utopian vocation, these publishing houses, in the words of Two Lines Press, which is linked to the Center for the Art of Translation, “celebrate the art of translation”. Translation is not only elevated to a creative activity on a

par with creative writing, it is almost romanticized as the unsurpassable means to unite and improve the world by opening up the linguistic gates of the United States. For this reason, Two Lines Press wants “to champion the unsung work of translators”. Conjuring up the idealistic idiom of the world republic of letters, Archipelago, which proudly claims to publish translations “from more than thirty languages”, states:

Artistic exchange between cultures is a crucial aspect of global understanding: literature can act as a catalyst to dissolve stereotypes and to reveal a common humanity between people of different nationalities, cultures, and backgrounds ... By publishing diverse and innovative literary translations we are doing what we can to change this lamentable circumstance and to broaden the American literary landscape.

Deep Vellum notes that it “seeks to enhance the open exchange of ideas among cultures and to connect the world’s greatest untranslated contemporary writers of literature and creative nonfiction with English-language readers for the first time through original translations”. For Open Letter, which, similar to Two Lines Press and Archipelago, *only* publishes writing in translation, “making world literature available in English is crucial to opening our cultural borders”. As a result, in their self-presentations, the bulk of these indie publishers commit themselves to rendering writers, previously unheard of within the linguistic borders of the United States, into English for the first time. Open Letter emphasizes that *The Taker and Other Stories* by Rubem Fonseca is “Fonseca’s first collection to appear in English translation”, and Graywolf cites *The Rumpus*’ acclaim of the publishing house for enabling “the first English translation of Daniel Sada, *Almost Never*, ... a bright introduction of this Spanish star who brings humor and unmatched style to the ordinary”. Deep Vellum, as a last example, claims its publication “in English for the first time ever” of Juan Rulfo’s *The Golden Cockerel & Other Writings* “herald[s] a landmark event in world literature”.

What is more, world literary publications are no longer rooted exclusively in authors’ imaginative faculties, nor are they cheered on as their sole merit. Instead, they are showcased as joint pieces of art springing from the “split genius” of author and translator, who is often promoted as a personality rather than an obscure mediating figure. This can be clearly observed in the material forms of world literary publications, with the translator’s name figuring on books’ covers almost as prominently as the author’s name, which is routine practice for all presses occupying the centre of this niche (bar Europa Editions). On the covers of all translations published by Two Lines Press, the translator’s name, as a rule, directly follows the author’s name. Coffee House Press, too, publicizes translators’

names nearly as noticeably as those of the authors. Translator Megan McDowell, for instance, has been raised to one of the eye-catchers on the cover of Diego Zúñiga's road novel *Camanchaca*, as her name is contained in the illustration of a paper van, giving the impression of being pasted to the cover as a second layer.

The website design of all of these presses is as much attuned to the translators of their world literary products as to these products' original authors. Book descriptions place their authors and translators side by side. Deep Vellum, among others, makes as much room for its translators as for its authors, even providing the translators' biographies. Open Letter features small biographies of translators equivalent to those of the authors on its book pages. The homepage of Two Lines Press even includes a "featured translator" section, complete with a biography and a translated excerpt, while no comparable privilege is reserved for the authors themselves. The blurbs and reviews surrounding the publications' descriptions as promotional material bring this context of co-creation to the fore in an equally unmistakable way. Graywolf, for instance, specifically spotlights the collaboration between author Daniel Sada and his translator Katherine Silver: "Thanks to Sada's controlled artistry and Katherine Silver's sparkling translation, [*One Out of Two*] manages to enchant and amuse". In a featured review, *Three Percent* even goes as far as labelling them as "the dream team behind *Almost Never*". In the world literary vernacular, world literary products are, in other words, not presented as authentic indigenous creations that emerge outside of institutions. The emphasis on translation firmly positions them as inevitably constituted through and resolutely undiminished by institutional mediation.

The world literary vernacular, however, does not wholly shun authenticity. The third and perhaps less predictable element is the fact that the transnational appeal of literature is linked to *regional or subnational* attachments. The regional embeddedness of these presses, in particular, is often underscored, and it serves to self-consciously distance them from New York. A press like Coffee House prominently communicates that it is "housed in Minneapolis' historic Grain Belt Bottling House", and that it participates in Minnesota cultural life as "interdisciplinary collaborators and incubators for new work and audience experiences". On top of that, their website as well as their online catalogues do not only acquaint the reader with the home country of their authors and translators, but also with their specific place of residence. Megan McDowell (translator of Zúñiga's *Camanchaca*), for instance, is said to be "a Spanish-language literary translator from Kentucky ... She lives in Santiago, Chile". Two Lines Press, based in San Francisco, specifically targets its educational translation programme "Poetry Inside Out" at its own regional community of students:

As California's – and the nation's – population becomes more diverse, it's vital that teaching materials reflect and honor that diversity. In San Francisco, where more than 112 languages are spoken, at least a quarter of students speak English as a second language. In Oakland, almost half of students speak a language other than English at home. Poetry Inside Out empowers students by drawing on the cultural and linguistic experiences they bring with them to school every day.

Likewise, Deep Vellum aims to “facilitat[e] educational opportunities for students of translation in the Dallas community, and promot[e] a more vibrant literary community in north Texas and beyond”. The publishing house therefore devotes itself “to build[ing] cultural bridges with Texas’ [rather than the United States’] neighbors in Mexico, Central America, and South America, with whom [they] share much of [their] history and culture”. It is, in short, intent on transregional connections rather than transnational ones. Like the other presses discussed above, Deep Vellum thus appears actively to engage in not merely promoting but also reinforcing the already existing regional community (a key word in the discourse of the world republic of letters).

Graywolf, also, sets great store by its own neighbourhood, priding itself on its “innovative collaborative partnership with the College of Saint Benedict in Saint Joseph, Minnesota”, while its location at the offices at the Traffic Zone Center for Visual Art in Minneapolis is a prominently displayed part of its identity. Rather than affiliating itself with New York, Archipelago establishes itself as a “Brooklyn-based not-for-profit publisher”, hence completely shifting the accent to the borough in which it is situated (a move not very different from that of Soho Press, for instance). The contemporary capital of the world republic of letters is, as it happens, not even mentioned explicitly. Minneapolis and Dallas, but also, for instance, Oakland (where Transit Books is housed) and Columbus (home to Two Dollar Radio): independent publishers seem to assert the vibrancy of not-quite-metropolitan environments – or at least, of locales that are urban but not quite New York. “Americanization”, again, in curatorial practice, means something else than a rerouting through New York. It points to a more refracted dynamic through relay stations in the American Heartland and the West that are crucial hubs in the current ecology of world literature. As Alexander Beecroft (2015, 18) has noted, one reason to prefer ecological metaphors to economic ones for the description of world literary dynamics is that “ecology is more comfortable accepting that the complexity may be inherent to the system”. Factoring in the role of regional hubs, then, is one way to move beyond an emphasis on cultural and economic capital and elaborate a world literary ecology as “a system in which the various inputs are not in fact equivalent to each other”. This would be the terrain of what this special issue calls “world literary unevenness”.

A fourth feature of the world literary vernacular is that world literary value is linked to a distinctly *modernist genealogy*, as world literary authors are often presented as the heirs apparent or reincarnations of the luminaries of literary modernism. One look at Open Letter’s news page suffices to be catapulted a century backwards. While Josefine Klougart is launched as “Scandinavia’s Virginia Woolf”, *Gesell Dome* by Guillermo Saccomanno is given the following description: “*True Detective* through the lenses of William Faulkner and John Dos Passos”. This feature of the world literary vernacular mainly manifests itself in the blurbs serving as promotion material on the publishers’ websites. These blurbs are written by other authors (who often share the blurbed author’s geographical roots), or by newspaper reviewers, which once more attests to world literature’s institutionally mediated essence. We will give a few illustrations. In a featured blurb by *The Independent*, Ricardo Piglia’s *Target in the Night*, published by Deep Vellum, is said to “ha[ve] inherited Borges’ quizzical intelligence, enthusiasm for the tireless exploration of literature and attraction to hidden depths”. Open Letter, too, takes Borges as its reference point with regard to Juan José Saer, his work *La Grande* in particular, and Rodrigo Fresán, who is labelled “a pop Borges”, while Archipelago cites *Kirkus Reviews* when banging the drums for Antonio Di Benedetto, who “blends the fantastic sensibilities of Borges and Kafka” in *Nest in the Bones: Stories*. Lúcio Cardoso’s *Chronicle of the Murdered House*, published by Open Letter, is praised in a blurb by author and translator Benjamin Moser as a “Faulknerian meditation on the perversities, including sexual, of degenerate country folk”. And, to end, it almost seems a prerequisite to mention James Joyce in the same breath as Daniel Sada, a Graywolf author, whether to applaud his “Joycean turns of phrase” or to brand him as a “Joycean maximalist”. What can, in conclusion, be observed from these, and many other, examples is that the modernist genealogy these independent presses draw on to market their authors is in fact limited to a small canon, consisting of, above all, a late modernist like Jorge Luis Borges, closely followed by Franz Kafka, James Joyce, and William Faulkner, with more occasional mentions for Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust. The centrality of Borges can be explained by his doing double duty as not only a late modernist but also a placeholder for Latin America – but here, the focus on modernism is again confirmed by the fact that Borges is more frequently mentioned than less self-consciously modernist boom authors like Llosa, Fuentes, and Marquéz. And again, the very limitedness of this list of modernist precursors may point to a very particularly American kind of provinciality, rather than to an unidirectional movement of devernacularization.

Fifth and finally, the world literary niche pays tribute to and tends to emphasize the value of their authors as literary entities, and sees the *oeuvre*, rather than the individual work, as the crucial unit of achievement. Deep

Vellum, to give an example, tends to publish trilogies, from Sergio Pitol's *Trilogy of Memory* to Jón Gnarr's *Childhood Memoir Trilogy*. This publisher also takes pride in its publication of Juan Rulfo's novella *The Golden Cock-erel*, "introducing this masterwork into Rulfo's timeless canon". Graywolf claims to "champion outstanding writers at all stages of their careers", and calls its writers "Graywolf authors" or "Graywolf veterans", referring to someone like Nobel Prize-winner Tomas Tranströmer as "Graywolf poet Tomas Tranströmer". If this emphasis on the *oeuvre* is sometimes combined with a focus on the writer's (and, as we saw, the translator's) personality, an emphasis this vernacular shares with mainstream publishing, the focus on stylistic features and writerly "voices" that extend beyond the single book is still remarkable. Europa Editions discloses that the idea behind its creation "was to capitalize on Edizioni E/O's deep roots in European publishing to bring fresh international voices to the American and British markets", expanding its originally (and still existing) Italian press to the English-speaking world.

The prominence of the *oeuvre* as a salient unit can be linked to the way these presses evidently present and market their authors as linguistic idiolects, each possessing their signature literary style or voice. World literary authors are, above all, defined and distinguished by this particular style, which permeates and overarches their full *oeuvre*, rather than, for example, a personality behind that *oeuvre*. Juan José Saer, published by Open Letter, is repeatedly applauded for his "trademark style" and "his idiosyncratic blend of philosophical ruminations and precise storytelling", while *La Grande*, the work crowning his *oeuvre*, is called "the grand culmination of his life's work, bringing together themes and characters explored throughout his career". Sergio Chejfec, too, is openly acclaimed for his "signature style", and his novel *The Dark* is considered "the most captivating example of Sergio Chejfec's unique narrative approach". This marketing of the author's signature style is perhaps most evident in Europa Editions' proclamation of Elena Ferrante as the face of the publishing house, having laid claim on her entire yet still expanding *oeuvre*. Their catalogues as well as their news section are plagued by "#Ferrantefever" (a term the press has proudly and overtly come to use itself as the title of their catalogue's recurring two-page section listing all Ferrante's published works), and their homepage includes a whole subdivision dedicated to her Neapolitan Quartet. Since the predominant identifying trait of Ferrante is the lack of an identity behind the pseudonym under which she has published her works, all the reader (and the publisher) can hold on to is the literary style running through her *oeuvre*. The face of Europa Editions is thus, in effect, a faceless voice. The case of Ferrante strongly indicates that *oeuvres* rather than mere personality are salient units of production in the world literary vernacular.

Conclusion: world literature, indie literature

The world literary ecology that emerges in the Anglophone publishing sphere when we pay attention to the way independent publishers articulate world literary value is a complex one: it underlines how world literary unevenness cannot be captured through a centre–periphery model, and how even the customary sequence of local consecration followed by world literary consecration only tells a part of the story of the dynamics of world literature. The widely publicized careers of Roberto Bolaño and Karl-Ove Knausgaard, which entered the United States through independent publishers before being taken up by one of the Big Five publishers, illustrates independent publishers’ vital role in the world literary ecology. The most remarkable world literary success in recent years, Elena Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Novels*, was published by Europa Editions, but was distributed by Penguin Random House (in a deal that was terminated in early 2018). Yet the case of Ferrante points to different nodes in the world literary network in a different way, as the *Neapolitan Novels* have given rise to an eight-episode HBO series that premiered in the autumn of 2018 – which, in its turn, reminds us that world literary circulation is always also a matter of continued remediation. If, as Michael Szalay (2017) has argued, HBO has become a major force in the production and consumption of contemporary American literature, it is also becoming part of the articulation of world literary value. A final hub in the world literary network in which independent publishing participates is constituted by Amazon: not only does the runaway consecration of Roberto Bolaño, as Sarah Pollack (2009, 357) has documented, owe a lot to aggressive marketing by Amazon, Amazon has in the last few years emerged as an important publishing platform that also caters to world literary audiences through its Amazon Crossing imprint. If Seattle has become a capital of world literature, it is a capital different from both New York and the regional hubs this essay has made visible. And as the case of Soho Press and Mike McCormack’s *Solar Bones* makes clear, New York is itself a more fractured geographical hub than an insistence on conglomerization would suggest (also think of Brooklyn’s Ugly Duckling Press and Melville House).

What does this mean for the “world” in world literature? At the very least, it makes it a much more diffuse category. Surveying the career of the notion of “world literature” in the last few decades, James English (2008, 305) proposes seeing world literature “as a phenomenon roughly analogous to and historically simultaneous with world music”. Both world music and world literature, English observes, are criticized for their alleged commercial opportunism, for producing “essentially false and touristic product[s] ... made for Euro-American consumption” (307), as well as for eliding artistic value in their pursuit of worldliness. Taking on board this musical analogy, it makes sense to compare the role of the independent publishers on which we focused to that of indie

rock. Indie rock, Ryan Hibbett (2005) explains, is marked by a resistance to popular success and the cultivation of a kind of insider knowledge. Yet if indie rock, Hibbett notes, “claims for itself a kind of vacuous existence, independent of the economic and political forces, as well as the value systems and aesthetic criteria, of large-scale production” (58), it also self-consciously shapes this position into a particular vernacular. The term “indie”, as opposed to “independent”, shows how indie rock “mystifies itself, its more literal meanings giving way to something more trendy and exclusive” (a procedure that resonates with the discursive fashioning of Sergio Pitol we discussed above). Crucially, this vernacular is increasingly being adopted as one more niche in the global music landscape. For delivery systems like Spotify and Amazon, “indie” is only one generic label among others, and it connotes much more a set of stylistic emphases than a posture of resistance. “Indie”, then, is a category that helps us make sense of the place of indie publishers in the world literary ecology – if only to disabuse us of the notion that “independent” still means what we thought it means.

ORCID

Pieter Vermeulen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1992-1646>

Amélie Hurkens  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8833-765X>

References

- Apter, Emily. 2013. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso.
- Archipelago Books. 2018. www.archipelagobooks.org.
- Becroft, Alexander. 2015. *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day*. London: Verso.
- Casanova, Pascale. 2004. *The World Republic of Letters*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cheah, Pheng. 2016. *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- CLMP. 2018. Community of Literary Magazines and Presses. <https://www.clmp.org/>.
- Coffee House Press. 2018. www.coffeehousepress.org.
- Dalkey Archive Press. 2018. www.dalkeyarchive.com.
- Deep Vellum. 2018. www.deepvellum.org.
- English, James. 2008. *The Economy of Prestige*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Europa Editions. 2018. www.europaeditions.com.
- Graywolf Press. 2018. www.graywolfpress.org.
- Gupta, Suman. 2015. *Cosumable Texts in Contemporary India: Uncultured Books and Biographical Sociology*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hibbett, Ryan. 2005. “What Is Indie Rock?” *Popular Music and Society* 28 (1): 55–77.
- Jackson, Jeanne-Marie. 2017. “The Art of Intellectual Curation: Mike McCormack’s *Solar Bones*.” *3:AM Magazine*, January 17. <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/art-intellectual-curation-mike-mccormacks-solar-bones>.
- Marling, William. 2016. *Gatekeepers: The Emergence of World Literature and the 1960s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Melville House Books. 2018. www.mhpbooks.com.
- Mufti, Aamir. 2016. *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- New Directions Publishing. 2018. www.ndbooks.com.
- Open Letter Books. 2018. www.openletterbooks.org.

- Parks, Tim. 2010. "The Dull New Global Novel." *NYR Blog*, February 9. <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/09/the-dull-new-global-novel>.
- Pollack, Sarah. 2009. "Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* in the United States." *Comparative Literature* 61 (3): 346–365.
- Pollock, Sheldon. 2000. "Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History." *Public Culture* 12 (3): 591–625.
- Sapiro, Gisèle. 2015. "Translation and Symbolic Capital in the Era of Globalization: French Literature in the United States." *Cultural Sociology* 9 (3): 320–346.
- Sinykin, Dan N. 2017. "The Conglomerate Era: Publishing, Authorship, and Literary Form, 1965–2007." *Contemporary Literature* 58 (4): 462–491.
- Soho Press. 2018. www.sohopress.com.
- Szalay, Michael. 2017. "The Author as Executive Producer." In *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, edited by Mitchum Huehls, and Rachel Greenwald Smith, 255–276. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Thompson, John. 2010. *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Two Dollar Radio. 2018. www.twodollarradio.com.
- Two Lines Press. 2018. <https://www.catranslation.org/books-journals>.
- Vermeulen, Pieter. 2017. "New York, Capital of World Literature? On Holocaust Memory and World Literary Value." *Anglia* 135 (1): 67–85.
- Wiemann, Dirk. 2014. "(Not) Readily Available: Kiran Nagarkar in the Global Market." In *Indian Writing in English and the Global Literary Market*, edited by Prakash Dwivedi, and Lisa Lau, 180–197. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.