

Rebecca L. Walkowitz. *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 2015. xi + 322 pp.

Serious readers are uneasy about reading in translation. They tend to assume that the nuances of a literary work are only recognizable in the language from which it originated. It would be limiting to read a translation. Ironizing this anxiety, Rebecca Walkowitz admits, "Some of my best friends read in translation. I bet some of your best friends do too" (171–72). In her wide-ranging new book, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, Walkowitz challenges the distinction between original and translation by showing how a new kind of "born-translated" novel is mediated by and written for translation from the start. For many twenty-first-century novelists, translation is not merely an afterthought but integral to their fiction writing. They may render a novel as if it had already been translated from another language, highlight English literature's indebtedness to other languages and literary cultures, foreground the imaginative work of their own translators, or dramatize the circulation of world literature itself. The stakes of Walkowitz's study are high, as these born-translated novels denaturalize the widely accepted belief that literary production necessarily precedes circulation. For authors ranging from J. M. Coetzee to Junot Díaz, global circulation is a source of production. Their novels are always already translations. In this way, Walkowitz argues that the born-translated novel offers a corrective to literary scholars' tendency to assume that a novel must originate from and belong to one language. "Instead of asking about the contemporary novel from the perspective of world literature," she writes, "we might ask about world literature from the perspective of the contemporary novel" (30).

While asking what the born-translated novel tells us about world literature, Walkowitz also considers what it may reveal about political belonging in the twenty-first century. She situates the born-translated novel in relation to two established theories of how books codify national community: the theory of possessive collectivism, in which the nation is understood as a collective individual whose character is embodied by a national literature, and Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, in which collectivism is conceived through an awareness of simultaneity among characters within a novel and readers without. While differing in many ways, these theories agree that a literary work originates in one language and that its readers will encounter it in that language. This idea, that novels are born in one language, began with the rise of national languages in the early

nineteenth century and, as Walkowitz argues, fails to account for "a text's multiple beginnings, and for the ways that it participates in and cuts across various collectivities" (83). The born-translated novel neither originates in one language nor does it end there. It is not a finished product but rather an ongoing process that constantly redraws the boundaries of the text and frustrates expectations of linguistic fluency and textual mastery.

Born Translated is particularly interested in how the contemporary novel serves as a source of critical insight into its own production, circulation, and consumption. The second chapter, for example, shows how Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction foregrounds the transformative effect of global circulation on cultural products and, in doing so, challenges the assumed correlation between aesthetic originality and political agency. While translation has long been accompanied by fears of cultural homogenization, Ishiguro's novels question the idealization of individuality by revealing how it has historically facilitated imperial violence and restricted the terms by which political collectivities are formed. Through analyses of his novels *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Walkowitz demonstrates how Ishiguro imagines new forms of political belonging by dramatizing the circulation of copies, series, and lists that are externally rather than internally unique. That is, their originality is located in their fluid relationship to other versions, interpretations, and echoes. They are unique precisely because they are products of circulation and productive of future translations. This account of Ishiguro's born-translated fiction illustrates a broader point Walkowitz makes about literature deemed untranslatable, a term used in two distinct ways by comparative literary scholars. Untranslatability may refer to either a semantic-level resistance to translation—a widely recognized hallmark of literary modernism—or an invitation to begin a process of translation that will never be completed. Ishiguro's writing is untranslatable in the second sense. Walkowitz identifies in his novels what she calls the "dramatization of translation" (44) by which born-translated novels "trump an ignoble 'translatability' not by resisting translation but by demanding it" (101). They acknowledge their origins in translation and facilitate a future through it.

Though it is not always easy to tell how linguistic translation relates to some of the more figurative forms of translation she discusses, Walkowitz powerfully and productively shows how the born-translated novel denaturalizes some of our most taken-for-granted reading practices. Crucially, she reveals how many twenty-first-century novelists prohibit readers from approaching their fiction as "native readers"—from reading with the assumption that a book was written for them and belongs to the language in which they

are encountering it—by addressing multiple audiences at the same time (6). Readers are not able to feel like the target audience of a born-translated novel and must instead grapple with the experience of partial fluency. The sharply observed fourth chapter explores the question of fluency in relation to novels by Jamaica Kincaid and Mohsin Hamid, who, though separated by a generation and influenced by different postcolonial geographies, share an interest in the second-person voice as a narrative strategy for decentering the monolingual American reader. Focusing on Kincaid's *Mr. Potter* (2002) and Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Walkowitz identifies how these writers direct the second-person address at an assumed American reader while blocking that reader's sense of fluency and groundedness by imagining multiple registers of you. This serves as a critique not only of Americans' expectation of reading natively in the original but also of the very idea of native reading. These born-translated novels demand less fluency than a greater knowledge of how languages and literary cultures circulate and structure differential relations of power and how these relations of power constitute us, or don't constitute us, as readers.

The field of world literature has changed dramatically in recent years, shifting its focus from the study of Western masterpieces and non-Western works treated as culturally representative to an emphasis on how literary works circulate across borders and continents and to what effect. Yet this new travel-minded definition also tends to conform to the idea that a novel originates in one language and only then goes on to interact with other languages and literary cultures. By placing translation at the center of an alternative approach to the study of world literature, *Born Translated* challenges the distinction between original and translation, native and foreign reader, and production and circulation. Indeed, as Walkowitz observes, the born-translated novel demands that we read in new ways. "No longer a master of many languages," she writes, "the reader of born-translated fiction is expected to understand less because understanding all the languages of the globe would be impossible, and to understand differently because new units of the book become meaningful" (209).

JOSEPH DARDA
Texas Christian University

