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TRANSLATION ACTIVISM MEETS AMAZON CROSSING

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The recent influx of translation-oriented journals, presses, and organizations in the U.S. and the U.K. over the last decade attests to the increasingly urgent stakes of lessening cultural insularity. Organizations such as Words without Borders (2003), Archipelago Books (2003), Open Letter Books (2008), *Asymptote* (2011), and the game-changing AmazonCrossing (2010), among several others, proclaim their willingness to combat the problem of Anglophone readers encountering themselves and others represented only in texts that were originally written in English. These organizations have made headway in calling the publishing world to account and in providing greater access to the voices and literary contributions of international authors. But, what are the possibilities and downsides of their drive to publish and promote more translated literature? Should we be more measured in celebrating their dually corrective and self-interested efforts to democratize the global literary scene? As Rajini Srikanth cautioned about Words without Borders seven years after its inception, “If [it] seeks to avoid the pitfall of easy consumption by English-speaking readers of non-Anglo cultures, then the editors need to intervene in very specific ways to create the kinds of readers that will help them realize the full potential of their project” (2010: 127). Srikanth’s proposed interventions include measures to combat “faux familiarity” (130), efforts to cultivate an awareness of what ready access conceals or simplifies, and careful approaches to “curating” that aim to ensure that readers’ experiences with translated texts are



not unduly casual or reductive (130–32). The implicit metric of both providing greater access to literature translated into English and maintaining the complexity of the worlds from which the translated texts originate allows us to assess whether these publishing venues signal or elide the scope of the worlds and publics that they promote and partially represent. This task becomes paramount as we consider the shadow cast by Amazon’s imprint AmazonCrossing, now by far the largest publisher of translated literature in the U.S. and an arm of, arguably, the biggest powerbroker in an increasingly globalized literary marketplace. Amazon’s entrance into the literary translation scene has the potential to both galvanize and, in some ways, undercut the push toward carving out a place for and cultivating an appreciation of translated literature for English-language readers. Because of its connection to the behemoth Amazon, AmazonCrossing presents an extraordinary opportunity for building a readership for translated literature, as well as the imperative to consider the literal and figurative costs associated with the business of publishing translated books.

The translation-oriented publishing houses and organizations discussed in this article draw impetus from the so-called “Three Percent” problem, the problem of so few translated texts being published in English. Translated texts constitute only an estimated three percent of the total annual book output in the U.S., and the percentage is closer to 0.7 percent when referring specifically to fiction and poetry (Three Percent 2016: n.p.).¹ This scarcity means that English-speaking readers have very limited access to or knowledge of texts from non-Anglophone languages and cultures and that major publishers (and their readers, by implication) act as cultural gatekeepers by barring foreign texts and authors from entering the

¹ According to a 2012 study by Literature Across Frontiers, the percentage of translated books in the U.K. and Ireland is slightly higher, around 4 percent (Donahaye 2012: 29).



global English-language literary marketplace.² This slight is compounded by the fact that texts written in English are those that are most likely to then be translated into other languages. Chad Post at Open Letter Books, “Translationista” translator and blogger Susan Bernofsky, translator and scholar Lawrence Venuti, and writer and translator Esther Allen are among those who have written doggedly and persuasively on or around this topic.³ As Venuti posits, “British

² I acknowledge here the fallacy of a monolingual or monocultural “English-speaking” reader—as the English language houses a wide variety of cultures, and English speakers the world-over are not assuredly monolingual. A 2013 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau suggests that at least one out of every five U.S. residents speaks a foreign language at home (Camarota and Zeigler 2014: n.p.). Nonetheless, publishing giants in the U.S. and the U.K. (referring particularly to the “Big Five”) are notorious for being, themselves, overwhelmingly white and for advancing a preponderance of works by predominantly white authors and content that is generally reflective of a white, monolingual culture. This lack of diversity is evidenced, in part, by the demographics of the publishing workforce (79 percent white overall according to the 2016 Diversity Baseline study by Lee and Low Books) (Low 2016: n.p.); scattered statistics about the comparatively few works by people of color (e.g., *The Bookseller* recently issued the finding that less than 100 of the thousands of books published in 2016 in the U.K. were by British authors of a non-white background) (Shaffi 2016: n.p.); and revealing data about the underrepresentation of people of color maintained by the U.S.-based Cooperative Children’s Book Center. Their statistics launched the “We Need Diverse Books” movement; see the breakdowns at <<<http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/>>>. In addition to the statistics compiled by Three Percent, PEN, and the aforementioned entities, there is a need for more exhaustive data about the output of books by English-language publishers.

³ Post is the primary force behind the blog at Three Percent, a website associated with the translation program at the University of Rochester and the in-house translation press, Open Letter Books. Three Percent ascribes to the “lofty goal of becoming a destination for readers, editors, and translators interested in finding out about modern and contemporary international literature” (2016, “About”), and Post’s blog is an invaluable source of translation-related news and data, as well as incisive (and fairly snarky) commentary about the trove of statistics and news-items. In her “Translationista” blog, Bernofsky tackles rarely discussed matters related to the practice and business of translation. A self-described “recovering academic” (2012,



and American publishers [...] have reaped the financial benefits of successfully imposing English-language cultural values on a vast foreign readership, while producing cultures in the United Kingdom and the United States that are aggressively monolingual [and] unreceptive to foreign literatures, [...]” (2008: 12). Likewise, in the 2007 PEN/IRL report, Allen argues, “English’s indifference to translation is not merely a problem for native speakers of English who thus deprive themselves of contact with the non-English-speaking world. It is also a roadblock to global discourse that affects writers in every language, and serves as one more means by which English consolidates its power by imposing itself as the sole mode of globalization” (23). Following a sobering 1997 NEA report on the state of international literature in the U.S., the PEN report by Allen and others vividly illustrated problems associated with the paucity of texts translated into English by providing a wealth of statistics and case studies evidencing the extent of the literary myopia in the U.S. and the U.K. compared to other countries. Translated books constitute a conservative 30 percent of literary texts published in France (Simenel 2007: 79), 40 percent in Turkey, and a whopping 70 percent in Slovenia (Allen 2007: 22). The PEN report’s discussion of “English as an Invasive Species” (17) and its indictment of the U.S. Academy for “devaluing [...] translation as a form of literary scholarship” (28-29) both reaffirmed and gave traction to the efforts of organizations such as Words without Borders, Pushkin Press (1997), Two Lines Press (1993), Dalkey Archive Press (1984), and other independent, non-profit, and university presses that have long sought to redress the dearth of translated literature in the English-language literary marketplace. The startling PEN report was certainly a factor in the surge of like-minded enterprises since 2007, including Open Letter,

“Talk Schleiermacher to Me”), she candidly unpacks and shines a spotlight on the significance of translation-related happenings and initiatives.



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AmazonCrossing, and *Asymptote*. Vice president of Amazon publishing Jeff Belle claims that after reading the PEN Report and confronting “the imbalance between English and the rest of the world when it came to translations,” he was struck by how the disparity was “really at odds with Amazon’s vision of making every book in every language available to our customers” (Belle 2011: n.p.). Amazon-Crossing was born, and Amazon made waves in October of 2015 by going so far as to invest \$10 million toward “increas[ing] the number and diversity of its books in translation” over the next five years (Business Wire 2015: n.p.), an unprecedented investment in publishing translated texts.

Whether in terms of advocacy or actual output, all of these organizations seem genuinely committed to mitigating the barriers and resistance toward publishing translated texts in English. Yet, what are their methods of remedying the imbalance? What are they doing to signal the vastness and the “untranslatability” of the publics and cultures that these translated texts present? Cultural theorist Kwame Appiah advances the notion of “thick translation,” “a translation that aims to be of use in literary teaching; [...] ‘academic’ translation, translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context” (2012, 341). Appiah advocates for a translation practice that “meets the need to challenge ourselves and our students to go further, to undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others” (341). He insinuates that translation and teaching should work hand in hand, that a translated text should not be presented as representative of an “autonom[ous] [...] Other” (342). His desires for translation align with Srikanth’s cautionary words about translation activism, that “while it is essential to bring translations of texts to the English-speaking reader, it is also critical to cultivate in the reader the interrogative stance” (2010: 130). Referencing the Words without Borders website, Srikanth adds that cultivating an interrogative reader



is especially urgent regarding web platforms “because the internet has been designed to *simplify* and *speed up* access to information precisely to give readers (users) the sense of an infinite collection of material merely a mouse click away” (2010, 130). Having easy access to translated literary texts will not ensure that readers have a sustained engagement with a foreign text or culture: even in the event that we could someday access all texts in every language, we could not easily measure the extent of a reader’s engagement with any one text. As Jim Collins argues, “literary reading in the age of universal access to the universal library is an uneven development shaped equally by contemporary information technologies, Romantic-era notions of the self, and the late Victorian conceptions of aesthetic value” (2010: 10). He proposes that as we approach this new “literary culture [...] we resist the urge to generalize about the effects of increased access” (10). Thus, the difficult, critical task is not just to celebrate greater access but to move toward a clearer understanding of what constitutes a transformative experience with a particular text and to be more aware of the varied forms and contexts that shape reading in the age of Amazon.

As crucial background to my discussion of AmazonCrossing and its complicated relationship with translators, potential readers, and the translation publishing scene, I discuss three of the most well-known and self-aware of the many translation-oriented publishing platforms: Words Without Borders, an online magazine and hub for international literature; *Asymptote*, an online journal and self-described “premier site for world literature in translation” (2016a: n.p.); and Dalkey Archive Press, a longstanding publisher of translated literature. Of course, there can be no easy conflation of these entities with AmazonCrossing, as Amazon is colossal and for-profit, and the others project a boutique image and are not-for-profit. However, bringing these translation-centered organizations together for analysis lends new legibility to their collective projects, permitting us to



identify advantages and limitations of their different platforms and to measure the “thickness” of the translations they promote. Moreover, examining how they produce and publicize translated texts provides a clear point of contrast helpful in measuring the still-to-be-determined effects of Amazon’s foray into publishing translated literature. As Mark McGurl indicates about his discussion of Amazon.com as an “event” in contemporary American literary history, “[t]o frame ‘the Age of Amazon’ as an object of study has the disadvantage of prematurity, in that the ultimate import of the company’s massive intervention into the realm of popular literary practice remains to be seen, but also the advantage of extreme plausibility and urgency” (2016: 447). With similar provisos, I argue that the advent of AmazonCrossing is an occasion for people in translation studies and related fields to reflect on emergent forms of translation activism and on how the aims of literary translation initiatives are both helped or hampered by forms of new media and by these initiatives’ close ties to academia and a non-profit platform. On the one hand, the Amazon imprint extends the work of academic and highly literary translation publishers; because of its customer-driven approach to publishing, it largely sidesteps the strictures of these more traditional outlets. Yet, on account of the same customer-centric impulse, it also cedes the foresight of careful curation. All at once, AmazonCrossing’s contrasting business model lends impetus to the efforts of these organizations, makes their work more urgent, and calls into question some of the assumptions driving the not-for-profit translation scene.

Translated Literature as a Not-for-Profit Pursuit

An online magazine for international literature turned veritable institution, Words without Borders (WWB) has worked to promote and publish “the finest” translated literature since 2003 and, in recent years, has made strides to extend the educational arm of its organization (Words without Borders 2016: n.p.). Its stated mission is,



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in part, to “open doors for readers of English around the world to the multiplicity of viewpoints, richness of experience, and literary perspective on world events offered by writers in other languages” (2016: n.p.). Each month, WWB posts a curated compendium of approximately a dozen newly translated works of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, as well as essays of literary criticism, interviews, and a brief introduction to the current issue. The magazine primarily publishes short works of contemporary literature and, on occasion, features excerpts from longer works or retranslations—for example, in July 2016, it featured portions of Allison Entrekin’s new translation of João Guimarães Rosa’s 1963 *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. The themes of past issues affirm the editors’ concerted efforts to showcase literary contributions and contributors neglected in the translated book business. These include: underrepresented genres such as graphic novels, science fiction, nature writing, and —my favorite— “non-Scandinavian” crime fiction; texts in minority languages including indigenous languages and “extra-national” languages; and texts by underrepresented demographics: exiles, migrants, women, and LGBTQ writers. Visitors can also search through site archives by country, language, or keyword, and, while subscriptions and donations are encouraged, access is entirely free. Through funding from the NEA, W. W. Norton, Amazon, and other sources, WWB manages to compensate their writers and translators. WWB has also partnered with other brick-and-mortar publishers to print a number of anthologies of texts from countries that have significant cultural and political differences with the U.S. and other “Western” countries — notably, *Literature from the “Axis of Evil”: Writing from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Other Enemy Nations* in 2006 and *Tablet and Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East* in 2010.

In 2014, WWB commenced their ambitious educational program, Words without Borders Campus, with the aim of “provid[ing] educators with resources and content to more readily incorporate



contemporary international literature into their classes” (Words without Borders 2016: n.p.). This initiative provides curricular tools for educators (lesson plans and multi-media materials), and it works to increase visibility for the authors, translators, and editors behind individual texts. Bernofsky, for one, commends their efforts to “bring foreign-language authors into schools to meet with students and discuss their work” (2012b: n.p.). The educational program makes explicit the pedagogical aims of the site and may in fact address some of Srikanth’s concerns that the “curators” of the site ought to do more to make readers aware of the complexities surrounding “foreign” texts and instruct visitors as to “How to Read a Translation.”⁴ On the subsidiary WWB Campus site, for instance, readers can access bilingual presentations of individual works and can read reviews of new translations. Moreover, both the WWB site and the WWB Campus sites give nearly equal billing to authors and translators, and both sites are amassing a vast archive of global works that combat the reductive notion that “translated literature” is itself a genre. The efforts of WWB seem steeped in pedagogy compared to the primarily market-driven approach of the AmazonCrossing and other for-profit publishers. Yet, as an outgrowth of its “free” online platform, WWB is limited to featuring mostly shorter texts that are “web-friendly” and can be read in a matter of minutes, and the user/reader’s engagement

⁴ Srikanth points out that Venuti’s seminal essay (by the same name) is somewhat buried within the site’s interface. Srikanth also emphasizes the unrealized opportunities for WWB editors to “supply diverse informational links” (2010: 142) through hypertext technologies and, at the same time, cautions against supplying the reader with so much information that he or she may “feel confident of having understood the nuances of cultural, historical, and political contexts” (144). While I second the possibilities of hypertext technologies and the concomitant danger of providing readers with a false sense of familiarity, I see the editors as careful about the pedagogical opportunities afforded by an online reading platform; they seem to strike an elusive balance between providing readers with too little context and overstepping with an extensive scholarly apparatus.



with the site as a whole has the sheen of altruism. Visitors to the “Get Involved” portion of the site, for example, encounter a plea for donations and a list of ways to “spread the word about international literature” (2018: n.p.). I have high praise for the larger project of WWB but ask if their aims to “create a passion for international literature” (2016: n.p.) are somewhat undone by the implicit message that interfacing with the site entails “doing good” rather than just reading for pleasure or abandon.

Similar to WWB, *Asymptote* actively foregrounds conversations about the project of translation, and the website’s paratextual content frequently signals the complexity and autonomy of texts from non-Anglo and non-Western countries. Even more than WWB, *Asymptote* aspires to internationalize and decentralize the publishing mechanisms of translation. It boasts “work from 105 countries and 84 languages” and commissions translations into English, multilingual writing, and “translations of texts into languages other than English” in order to “engag[e] other linguistic communities and disrupt[t] the English-centered flow of information” (Asymptote 2016a: n.p.). Not located in any one city and reliant on a pool of editors, translators, and interns across “six continents” (n.p.), the journal resists a single place of articulation. As Rebecca Walkowitz indicates, “They are engaged in two kinds of rebalancing: encouraging English-language readers to become acquainted with literature composed in other languages and developing alternative pathways that do not address English at all” (2015: 239). The very title of the journal plays on the notion of approximating, drawing near but never quite arriving—an apt figuration of translation and, also, the journal itself.

Asymptote is, perhaps, the most committedly theoretical of the not-for-profit translation organizations. To this end, the criticism section of each issue is nearly proportional to the literature section, the latter of which consists of mostly short works of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama, and several more excerpts from longer



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works than in issues of the WWB magazine. As editor-in-chief Lee Yew Leong stated in the inaugural January 2011 issue:

We'd like to be the sort of magazine where literary translation is not only presented but *also* discussed, so that the envelope is pushed and no, we'll say up front now that we're not afraid of theory. Our vision of the criticism section includes academic (but mind you, this is no excuse to *bore*) essays of up to 10,000 words, but we'd also like the occasional casual review, written, as my Criticism editor put it, while drinking coffee. (Lee Yew Leong 2011: n.p.)

In one such essay, translator Alice Guthrie discusses with *Asymptote* writer Julia Sherwood the difficulties she has encountered in “trying to spread the word about Syrian literature, which could potentially perpetuate gender stereotypes” (Sherwood 2015: n.p.). *Asymptote* issues regularly include essays by and interviews with translators, as well as reviews of recent translations and essays about topics relevant to translation—for example, the interview with David Damrosch on the status and promotion of “world literature” in the January 2015 issue. The journal also has an extensive FAQ section, often presents source texts bilingually, and, on occasion, provides mp3 recordings of the source texts. Through such endeavors, the editors attempt to unpack or “make visible” some of the processes of translation. In her book *Born Translated*, in which she examines literary texts that seem to anticipate the perceived necessity of translation into English, Walkowitz argues that *Asymptote* “shares with many born-translated novels a commitment to probing translation while also facilitating it” (2015: 239). The journal’s presentation of translated texts is decidedly “thick” and context-driven.

Clearly, then, *Asymptote* seems committed to facilitating a situated reading experience. In a round-about way, their pedagogical efforts may be tied to their exclusively “volunteer-based publishing model.” The journal relies largely on the altruism of translators,



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writers, and other staff members—contributors willing to donate their time, energies, and creative work product. In response to the question “Why don’t you pay your contributors?” on the FAQ section of the website, the editors state:

We ourselves are volunteers, and want to keep access to our site free, in line with our mission of catalyzing the transmission of world literature to as many readers as possible. We advocate for translators in many other ways, not least through our translation contests, which require us to undertake fundraising, in addition to promoting and administering the contest. It is also through appearing in *Asymptote*, for example, that many translators go on to sign book contracts with publishing houses. We are proud to provide such visibility to hitherto unknown authors and emerging translators. Should we eventually receive funding allowing us to cover operating costs, hire an accountant, and pay our staff members and contributors, we will certainly do so, and in that order. (*Asymptote* 2016b: n.p.)

While not wanting to hold *Asymptote* to an untenable standard, I maintain that the journal editors could be even more transparent about the “costs” of volunteerism, about the ramifications of nonpayment and their adoption of an intermediary role between publishing houses and emerging writers and translators. Foreseeably, nonpayment compensates mainly those contributors who already have assured incomes and see publishing as a means of gaining prestige and of contributing to a scholarly conversation. Such a model could turn university professors into a disproportionate demographic among journal contributors, and an increased proportion of academic-types could contribute to or normalize a decidedly “thick” translation praxis. Undoubtedly, a practice steeped in or surrounded by “academese” would occasion a reading experience different than the more casual encounters afforded by either the print or electronic offerings of AmazonCrossing. *Asymptote’s* embrace of



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literary theory and its reliance on a global swath of willing academics could cultivate a careful readership but could also constrain the journal’s stated efforts to reach “beyond niche communities of literary translators and world literature enthusiasts” (2016b: n.p.).⁵

Despite the fact that Dalkey Archive Press is not-for-profit, its catalog shares more qualities with the products created by AmazonCrossing than the output of WWB or *Asymptote*. Instead of short, “web-friendly” fiction, the press publishes mostly book-length texts, including many novels, which are still the mainstay of the major literary publishers. In a 2015 *Guardian* article about the advent of AmazonCrossing, Alex Shephard writes:

Over the past five years, only Dalkey Archive, the uber-literary small press that has published books by authors like Carlos Fuentes, Viktor Shklovsky, and Danilo Kiš, has published more works in translation than AmazonCrossing. This year, AmazonCrossing plans to publish “77 titles from 15 countries and 12 languages” in the United States, which will almost certainly dwarf the output of Dalkey and its ilk. (Shephard 2015: n.p.).

Indeed, since its inception in 1984, Dalkey has published 745 books total, a sizeable contribution to the English-language literary translation scene but a mere fraction of Amazon’s total output. In addition to AmazonCrossing, Amazon currently has twelve publishing imprints, including: AmazonEncore for out-of-print books, Grand Harbor for self-help and spirituality, Two Lions for children’s literature, Jet City for comics and graphic novels, Montlake for romance, and Thomas & Mercer for mysteries and thrillers. Yet, while Amazon, at a

⁵ Over the last few years, *Asymptote* has undertaken a number of endeavors geared toward a larger public, including: a blog, a newsletter, a podcast, and (together with *The Guardian*’s Books Network) “Translation Tuesdays”—a weekly showcase of new literary translations for the newspaper” (2016a: n.p.). Each of these initiatives merits further discussion.



first glance, markets translated fiction like a genre unto itself, Dalkey has a carefully curated and highly literary catalog, of which translated titles constitute about 50 percent (O’Brien 2004: n.p.). Dalkey titles are, in general, critically acclaimed (including a number of international literary award winners) and fairly academic (as suggested by the rather heady titles in the Literary Criticism, Philosophy, and Theory sections of the catalog). Prospective buyers can browse by country, author, series, or genre—and books on the Dalkey backlist never go out of print. As stated on its Facebook page, the press “was and is a hopelessly quixotic venture” dedicated to publishing “the best contemporary literature from across the world” (Dalkey 2016b: n.p.). Dalkey founder and director Jim O’Brien indicates that the press is absolutely committed to “foreign literature and the need to see literature in an international context” and expresses his nearly evangelical conviction that “we know that there are hundreds of truly important novelists from around the world who will never be available in this country unless Dalkey Archive translates and publishes them” (Dalkey 2016a: n.p.). O’Brien acknowledges the challenge of maintaining both interest and context for readers and points to the “Context” and “Review” sections of the website as places where Dalkey tries to create and educate readers (n.p.). Whether through reviews of Dalkey titles, essays about translation, interviews with authors and translators, or secondary criticism on the fictional and actual worlds represented, Dalkey is wholly dedicated to spreading the word about and nurturing an appreciation for quality foreign titles.

Like both WWB and *Asymptote*, Dalkey’s major limitation is its idealism and consequent dependence on outside donations to keep afloat. As Blake Butler writes for Vice.com, Dalkey Archive boasts one of “the most ambitious catalogs in literature” and “has done all of this with little regard for its own sustainability—it keeps all its titles continuously in print, regardless of commercial success, focusing instead on giving life to works it finds culturally valuable. It’s sort of



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like a museum in that way, a source intent only on providing sustenance for major works that may have disappeared, or never appeared at all” (2014: n.p.). Ostensibly, the catalog occasions a fairly self-selecting readership—and the pursuit of titles that may not bring commercial success puts the press in the position of being constantly occupied by fundraising, a decidedly grueling endeavor. As O’Brien recalls in a 2014 interview with Mihkel Mutt, “Last year [2013] we received funding from 52 different sources, and most of them were governmental. This means 52 applications, 52 reports, and 52 grants to keep track of” (2014: 24-25). Building off support from the Mellon Foundation, Dalkey is currently in the thick of an endowment campaign in pursuit of a long-term source of funding. They seek funds that will help them weather future “shifts in the marketplace” and the “ongoing challenges presented” to several of its governmental funding sources (Dalkey 2016a: n.p.) and to continue to pay writers, translators, and other contributors. Dalkey’s not-for-profit pursuit of the “best” of international literature rests on a fairly highbrow yet idealistic vision of the literary world, inescapably tethered to its simultaneous need to fund and underwrite such idealism.

Translated Literature as Popular and Profitable

Known for its relentless crusade to corner the market on “everything,” Amazon is not heralded for idealism or altruism.⁶ Still, its dramatic entrance into the business of promoting and publishing translated books lends tremendous weight behind the drive for greater access to international titles. As Chad Post declared in 2015, AmazonCrossing is “the story” (n.p.). It appears, at once, a kind of course correction and merely an extension of being Amazon. Since upending the book

⁶ For more on Amazon’s monopolization of the book world and its monopolization of the world via books see Brad Stone’s *The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon*, James Marcus’s *Amazonia: Five Years at the Epicenter of the Dot.com Juggernaut*, and McGurl’s “Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon.”



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market in 1994, Amazon has made both adversaries and dependents of big and small publishing houses. As George Packer writes in his tell-all *New Yorker* article “Cheap Words,”

Crucially, there are far too many books, in and out of print, to sell even a fraction of them at a physical store. The vast selection made possible by the Internet gave Amazon its initial advantage, and a wedge into selling everything else. For Bezos to have seen a bookstore as a means to world domination at the beginning of the Internet age, when there was already a crisis of confidence in the publishing world, in a country not known for its book-crazy public, was a stroke of business genius. (Packer 2014: n.p.)

Within just a couple years of its inception, Amazon was, all at once, making physical bookstores obsolete and ensuring sales for them. As Packer describes,

Book publishers’ dependence on Amazon, however unwilling, keeps growing. Amazon constitutes a third of one major house’s retail sales on a given week, with the growth chart pointing toward fifty per cent [sic]. By contrast, independents represent under ten per cent, and one New York editor said that only a third of the three thousand brick-and-mortar bookstores still in existence would remain financially healthy if publishers didn’t waive certain terms of payment. (Packer 2014: n.p.)

As Amazon cements its status as the first and cheapest access point for English-language books, it tightens its juggernaut hold on the book-selling business and its subsidiaries, large and small. Packer intimates that “publishers are less like abused minors and more like financially insecure adults who rely on the support of a bullying uncle. Their dependence breeds bad faith” (n.p.). He cites a marketing executive who recounts, “Privately, we berate Amazon [...] [y]et we’re always trying to figure out how to work with them” (n.p.). Moreover,



as Jeff Stone hammers home in his compelling *The Everything Store*, Bezos did not win any points with the kinds of small, niche publishers apt to publish translated literature when he suggested that “Amazon should approach these small publishers the way a cheetah would pursue a sickly gazelle” (Bezos 2013: 243). Amazon’s relationship with such publishers was once referred to internally as the “Gazelle Project” (243).⁷ Still, the great opportunity born of AmazonCrossing is that, more than any of the not-for-profit, independent, or university presses inclined to publish translated texts, Amazon has the literal and figurative capital necessary to test and, perhaps, dispel the notion that publishing translated literature is not profitable and only for do-gooders. As Bernofsky declares, “Good for Amazon for declaring Translationland a place where money can indeed be made” (Bernofsky 2015: n.p.).

Amazon’s willingness to challenge the assumption that readers don’t buy or read translated books is, on the one hand, motivated by apparently sincere desires to account for the glaring absence of foreign authors in the English-language literary marketplace. As Sarah Jane Gunter, manager of Amazon’s International Publishing arm, recounted to Paul Sawers of VentureBeat, “Our new website for submissions will help us cast a broader net in finding great books for translation, with the hope of increasing the number of acquisitions from countries that are traditionally underrepresented in translation” (Sawers 2015: n.p.). On the other hand, Amazon’s multimillion dollar foray into translated literature is also calculated in

⁷ Amazon has actively undertaken efforts to amend its toxic reputation with publishers and booksellers. Since 2008, John Fine has directed Amazon’s “author-publisher relations” with the intent of lessening publishers’ animosity toward Amazon, and every year Amazon awards about a dozen grants to smaller publishers (Packer 2014, n.p.). Amazon has given financial backing to, for example, the PEN American Center, The Best Translated Book Award (Packer 2014, n.p.), and The Center of Translation (The Center 2009, n.p.).



that it recognizes and capitalizes on an underserved market of readers. Sawers posits, “Translation offers a potentially lucrative inroad into the publishing realm for Amazon—by taking on proven hit books from other languages, it can claim exclusive access to the rights in English, both as a publisher and as a seller through Amazon.com” (n.p.). As the “everything store,” Amazon is poised to surpass the offerings of even niche, translation-oriented presses. Amazon has published an estimated three to four times more translated titles than any other press in the United States over the past few years, and it has set its sights on publishing somewhat neglected genre fiction titles (Post 2011: n.p.)—for instance, the best-selling *Hangman’s Daughter* series by Oliver Pötzsch and the popular *Valhalla* series by Johanne Hildebrandt. As Post argues, “They’re [...] filling in gaps, since most of the presses doing translation are focused on the Very Literary. Amazon is going after books the common reader wants to read, and they know how to reach these people. In the end, this might help expand the overall audience for international fiction” (cited in Flood 2015: n.p.). Arguably, Amazon’s populist notion of the “best” books may do more to bridge the cultural gulf between “English-only” readers and their foreign counterparts than, say, readers’ encounters with the literary and acclaimed texts of distant peoples and cultures. As Maria Tymoczko argues, “sometimes the fact of translation itself—whatever the textual strategy—is the primary activist achievement” (Tymoczko 2010: 229).

Recent AmazonCrossing titles have been featured by country, with “spotlights” on individual countries, including Germany, China, Indonesia, Finland, Iceland, and Brazil. An Amazon press release about the Indonesia “spotlight” advertises forthcoming titles such as:

-*Nirzona*, a love story by Abdiah El Khaliqy, set against the backdrop of the Aceh tsunami, a rare moment in recent history when the world’s eyes turned to Indonesia.



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- English-language originals *The Oddfits* and *The More Known World*, the first two titles in the Oddfits series from Indonesia-born Tiffany Tsao, a translator and past Indonesia editor-at-large for *Asymptote*.⁸
- Paper Boats*, a new adult love story written in glittering, quotable prose from popular novelist, actress, and singer Dee Lestari.
- A new edition of Laksmi Pamuntjak’s acclaimed *A Question of Red* and her latest, *Aruna and Her Palate*, which follows a food writer’s travels through Indonesia.
- Hummingbird*, a stunning work of magical realism from Nukila Amal (Digital Book World 2015: n.p.)

Adjectives like “rare,” “glittering,” “stunning,” and “magical” emphasize the allure of these primarily genre-fiction titles, and the enticing rhetoric of the blurbs reinforces the insinuations of travel and adventure that dot the imprint’s homepage, for instance the tags “Find Your Adventure” or “Explore Translated Fiction.” Yet, the same press release also quotes author Tiffany Tsao about the opportunity to publish her novels with AmazonCrossing. Tsao relates, “I feel like my writing and I are difficult to categorize [...] *The Oddfits* resists classification in many respects. And as someone affiliated with multiple cultures and places, I don’t fit easily into ready-made boxes either. I’m so incredibly happy to be working with a publisher adventurous enough to give oddness a chance” (Digital Book World 2015: n.p.). Tsao implies that AmazonCrossing is able and willing to take on books that other publishers might overlook, and the press release’s quiet nod to Tsao’s role at *Asymptote* points to likely intersections between AmazonCrossing and the more academic projects of *Asymptote* and other translation-oriented organizations. Tsao, for example, also translated a shorter text by advertised AmazonCrossing author Laksmi Pamuntjak for *Asymptote*. Indeed,

⁸ While the press release describes Tsao as born in Indonesia, her Amazon bio says she was born in San Diego.



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AmazonCrossing appears eager to publish titles only excerpted on sites such as *Asymptote* or WWB; and it openly solicits input from potential readers and reviewers. Toward the end of democratizing its offerings, the imprint features a submissions “portal” where translators, agents, and readers can “propose a book for translation” or suggest titles they would like to see available in translation into English (AmazonCrossing 2016: n.p.). While AmazonCrossing titles are, from the outset, lumped together as a single category, the imprint’s homepage gives users the option of browsing by genre, author, or series, and the submissions portal specifies a preference for forms of genre-fiction: “Fantasy; Historical Fiction; Literary Fiction; Memoir; Mystery, Thriller, and Suspense; Romance; Science Fiction; Women’s Fiction; and Young Adult Fiction” (n.p.) —categories quite similar to Amazon Publishing’s twelve other English-language imprints. Though the marketing of AmazonCrossing titles falls into familiar and problematic patterns of exoticizing, the imprint expands the confines of the global literary marketplace by bringing new readers to a range of international titles and by carving out a place for titles not typically heralded by non-profit translation presses.

In short, AmazonCrossing both extends and makes more necessary the efforts of organizations and presses like WWB, *Asymptote*, or Dalkey Archive Press. Its investment in translated literature could result in measurable profits for authors virtually shut out of the global literary market and broader cultural dividends for English-language readers. However, the teaching aspirations of organizations such as those above become even more vital given that Amazon values a diversity (and totality) of products more than a visible translation process or a concerted pedagogy. Books available through AmazonCrossing are, first and foremost, products for customers. As Post describes, Amazon’s “customer-centric approach is unique, almost the diametrical opposite to the traditional ‘I know what readers want’ mantra of most editors” (Post 2010: n.p.). Aside



from blurbs about the plot, brief “About the Author” and “About the Translator” statements in the backs of their books, and online reader reviews, AmazonCrossing titles are presented with minimal context or curation. Reader reviews do, however, provide a sort of crowd-sourced context both quantitative and qualitative — *The Moonlit Garden*, a work of historical fiction, mystery, and romance by German author Corina Bomann currently has 3,448 reviews and Viveca Sten’s *Still Waters*, the first book in the Swedish crime writer’s Sandhamn Murders series, has 1,445. Though these reviews range from substantive to vapid, they nonetheless constitute a forum in which readers can engage with each other and attain a provisional sense of the real or imagined worlds of a particular translated text. While such online forums may embolden vitriolic commenters buoyed by the prospect of anonymity, reader comments could compensate, in part, for AmazonCrossing’s lack of an educational arm. In addition, we have to concede that there are instances when paratextual interventions in or around translated texts may not even be in line with the “skopos” or perceived purpose of the source text. A reader’s choice of a particular genre-fiction title is, arguably, already a choice and commitment against the intellectual engagement that sustains a “thick” translation practice.

The larger question at stake is the impact AmazonCrossing may have on other literary translation initiatives, as well as the profession and craft of translation in the English-language literary marketplace. As Bernofsky writes, “Whether [AmazonCrossing] will prove to be an all-around boon for literary translators and the literature they love remains to be seen” (Bernofsky 2015: n.p.). The imprint’s inseparable ties to its parent company constrain overly celebratory pronouncements about the possibilities offered to the translation-publishing scene. For starters, Amazon’s eagerness to have “everything for everyone” could diminish as much as propel the multiplicity of viewpoints sought after by other translation-centered



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organizations. As Packer argues, Amazon’s virtual monopoly of the larger book business is dangerous because

in the book business the prospect of a single owner of both the means of production and the modes of distribution is especially worrisome: it would give Amazon more control over the exchange of ideas than any company in U.S. history. Even in the iPhone age, books remain central to American intellectual life, and perhaps to democracy. And so the big question is not just whether Amazon is bad for the book industry; it’s whether Amazon is bad for books. (Packer 2014: n.p.)

Amazon is poised to become both the primary distributor and primary adjudicator of translated books in the English language, and the extent to which it may counter the “three percent problem” may not compensate for the extent to which it creates other problems within the world of literary translation. Moreover, Amazon’s monopoly of the distribution arm of the global literary marketplace could taint the reception of its translated texts and authors in “literary” circles. As Anna Baddeley wrote in *The Guardian*,

The venomous way Amazon is spoken about in some bookish circles makes me doubt whether an AmazonCrossing title will make the longlist for the Man Booker International or Independent foreign fiction prize soon. But then Amazon, unlike other publishers, doesn’t need prizes to sell its books. (Baddeley 2015: n.p.).

Presumably, many translated authors would opt for, even, a tainted reception in English literary marketplace rather than none at all. For this reason, Amazon’s unsympathetic and proprietary dealings with publishers, writers, and translators (and other such “gazelles” of the literary world) merit greater attention and scrutiny. In May 2014, for example, the French Literary Translators’ Associa-



tion (Association des Traducteurs Littéraires de France or ATLF) wrote an open letter to Amazon protesting the terms of its contracts, particularly its non-disclosure agreement. Bernofsky reports that the ATLF, “accused Amazon of forcing translators to sign contracts that are illegal under French law, signing away rights to their work that should be inalienably theirs while preventing them from talking about this or consulting others” and that the payments offered were about “a third of the sums usually paid for the same work in France, and that the contracts permit Amazon to reject any translation at its own discretion, requiring the return of the initial advance paid to the translator” (Bernofsky 2014: n.p.). There are also unverified reports that “based on the feedback of translators,” Amazon was / is “previewing a new version of the contract that no longer asks translators to keep financial terms confidential” (Thu-Huong Ha 2015, n.p.). More work needs to be done to elucidate specific ways in which Amazon subordinates authors, translators, and publishers to the ideal of “the customer.”

Though it creates a point of access that could eventually constitute a “Crossing,” AmazonCrossing brings translated books to English-language readers more than it brings these readers to translated books. While we can applaud Amazon making individual translated texts available and, in some cases, popular and profitable, we should remain wary of the possibility that easy access could prompt equally easy summations of those cultures and peoples encountered in translation. As Aamir Mufti argues about the impending Anglicization of world literature, “the ongoing institutionalization of world literature in the academic humanities and in publishing cannot quite dispel a lingering sense of unease about its supposed overcoming of antagonisms and a reconciliation and singularity that is too easily achieved” (2016: x). Amazon’s for-profit pursuit of translated literature has the potential to impact world letters and the global literary marketplace in ways that are yet



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unrealized and not hampered by the institutional norms of academia or the limitations of small, not-for-profit, or independent publishers. Yet, in its current form, the imprint does not require readers to “cross” so much as to simply consume.

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Abstract:

This article examines the impact of Amazon’s imprint AmazonCrossing —now the largest publisher of translated literature in the U.S. and an arm of, arguably, the biggest powerbroker in an increasingly globalized literary marketplace— and puts



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AmazonCrossing into conversation with three important not-for-profit organizations dedicated to publishing international literature: Words without Borders, *Asymptote*, and Dalkey Archive Press. Bringing these entities into conversation permits us to identify advantages and limitations of their different platforms and approaches to translation. Moreover, examining how these various entities produce and publicize translated texts provides a point of contrast helpful in measuring the still-to-be-determined effects of Amazon’s foray into publishing translated literature. All at once, Amazon’s turn to translated literature lends impetus to the efforts of these non-profit organizations, makes their work more urgent, and calls into question some of the assumptions driving the not-for-profit translation scene. The event of AmazonCrossing is an occasion for those in translation studies and related fields to reflect on emergent forms of translation activism and on how the aims of literary translation initiatives are both helped and hampered by forms of new media and by these initiatives’ close ties to academia and a non-profit model.

Key Words: Translation Activism, AmazonCrossing, Words without Borders, Dalkey Archive Press, *Asymptote*

ENCUENTRO ENTRE LA TRADUCCIÓN ACTIVISTA Y AMAZONCROSSING

Resumen:

Este artículo examina el impacto de AmazonCrossing, una editorial subsidiaria de Amazon.com —editorial que actualmente publica la mayor cantidad de la literatura traducida en los Estados Unidos y una subsidiaria de, posiblemente, la compañía más influyente del mercado literario cada vez más global— y pone AmazonCrossing en diálogo con tres importantes organizaciones sin ánimo de lucro que se



centran en publicar la literatura mundial: Words without Borders, *Asymptote* y Dalkey Archive Press. Poner estas organizaciones en diálogo nos permite identificar las ventajas y limitaciones de sus distintos programas y acercamientos a la traducción. Además, examinando los programas de producción y publicidad de estas organizaciones nos da un punto de partida desde el que podemos aproximarnos a las consecuencias ya indefinidas de la entrada de Amazon al mundo de la literatura traducida al inglés. Al mismo tiempo, el hecho de que en Amazon se haya hecho hincapié en la traducción ha dado ímpetu a los esfuerzos de estas organizaciones, ha hecho que sus esfuerzos sean más urgentes y ha puesto en entredicho algunas de los supuestos que animan a las iniciativas sin ánimo de lucro. Para los que trabajan en los Estudios de Traducción y los que se centran en campos afines, el evento de AmazonCrossing brinda la oportunidad de pensar en las formas emergentes de las iniciativas activistas de la traducción literaria para así evaluar cómo estas iniciativas se han beneficiado de, o se han visto restringidas por los medios masivos y sus interrelaciones con el mundo académico, así como con un cierto modelo del sector benéfico.

Palabras clave: Traducción activista, AmazonCrossing, Words without Borders, Dalkey Archive Press, Asíntota.

