Gesine Müller and Mariano Siskind

Introduction

The latest iteration of the concepts of world literature and cosmopolitanism in the second half of the 1990s was one of the ways the humanities and literary studies in particular attempted to address the process of neoliberal economic and cultural globalization that had begun to transform the planet (particularly, but not exclusively urban centers) since the 1980s. Even though the cultural politics of the different strains of world literary critical discourses that circulated over the past two decades varied greatly, their intellectual lineages can be traced back to Goethe’s rejection of nation-bound signifying frames for the study of literature and culture (“Now national literature doesn’t mean much”\(^1\)), which seemed to no longer shed light on objects of study marked by transnational contexts of production, linguistic intersection, and local manifestations of cosmopolitan culture. And all of them also shared a certain sense of euphoria regarding the potential of cosmopolitan critical discourses to resist, postpone and even reinscribe and redirect the ideological orientation of the universalist forces driving the process that produced (and was producing) the global hegemony of neoliberal capital.

The overwhelming sense of political, economic, institutional and humanitarian crisis that defines the state of the world in 2019 (understood as a set of necessary determinations which shapes the conditions of enunciation of academic and intellectual projects) makes it difficult if not impossible to continue to sustain that kind of self-affirming, hubristic culturalist confidence in the political power of world literature as a critico-theoretical frame capable of disrupting the process of neoliberal globalization or the resurgence of nationalistic and racist forms of xenophobia and ethnocentrism, or the disciplinary ability to make sense of the meaning of new kinds of global displacements and dislocations.

This historical juncture demands a general revaluation of the conceptual scope and critical efficacy of world literature, cosmopolitanism and globality; to think beyond, otherwise, post or against conventional, inherited definitions of their signifying inscriptions. It seems to us that this is a historical challenge that all literary scholars interested in these problems have to face, but it is particularly relevant for Latin Americanists and critics specialized in other marginalized


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literatures which entered world literary studies, debates and anthologies as a result of a tokenist logic according to which supposedly stereotypical texts established a metonymic relation with the totality of the culture they were supposed to express. So for Latin Americanists and critics of other marginalized literatures, discontent with the ways world literature, cosmopolitanism and globality have been conceptualized and put to work in romance studies, comparative literature and global history (among other disciplines) is nothing new. In fact, from the very beginning their participation in the collective making of an institutionally established field of studies has been marked by a sense of dissatisfaction with the terms of the debate and the attempt to correct the ornamental function assigned to the region’s literature by proposing varied ways of interpreting the place of Latin American culture in the world, but also by thinking through the production of the world from Latin America, the wide array of local, particularistic enunciations of universalist discourses (of particularly Latin American worldly gazes), as well as the material circulation and appropriations of Latin American literatures in the world, and of the literatures of the world in Latin America.

This was always the case, and the current state of global and local affairs calls for a radical revision of these categories again, and asks to interrogate the meaning they produce. Indeed, the aim of this volume is to explore possible alternations, critiques, reconceptualizations, and abandonments of world literature and cosmopolitanism beyond, against, after or displacing globalization.

The articles gathered here are the result of a discussion which took place at the University of Cologne along several related axes: the theoretical making of world literature and the ways Latin Americanist scholars have subverted them, the need to reassess the cultural politics of cosmopolitanism when its emancipatory horizon seems to have been exhausted, and the concrete examination of how the book publishing industry, translation and cultural markets, and transnational academic relations function in a context where stable assumptions about the history of neoliberal globalization might need to be reconsidered. All contributions in this volume attempt to open new critical perspectives related to what we would tentatively call our post-global moment.

The book is organized around five different sections or clusters; each one of them articulates the aforementioned discontents and proposes new ways of thinking the past and the present from the point of view of the categorical crisis that defines our own context of enunciation. The first section is entitled “Revisiting world literary institutions: publishers, academic institutions and the way we read” and includes three articles. In “Debating world literature without the world: ideas for materializing literary studies based on examples from Latin America and the Caribbean”, Gesine Müller calls for the greater consideration of material realities in
the debate around world literature. In order to explore how a critical material approach to world literature can be shaped beyond the market-centered dynamics of globalization, Müller considers literary sociology’s most recent ideas in relation to the concept of world literature through an examination of specific publishing practices and the physical book industry. Using two very different examples – the international circulation of García Márquez’s novels and the book series based on the Les peuples de l’eau expeditions, published by Édouard Glissant – Müller investigates what can be learned from the examination of the material basis of circulation.

Gustavo Guerrero’s article, “Literatura mundial y multilateralismo: cambiando de rumbo”, claims that the resurgence of the discussion around the idea of a world literature in the 1990s can be linked to the emergence of multiculturalist and postcolonial streams of thought and the consequent defense of a poetics of global diversity capable of embodying a new cosmopolitan ideal; and to prove this point, like Müller, he examines the work of the Martinican poet Édouard Glissant. On the other hand, in light of the expectations created during the 1990s, Guerrero examines the academic institutionalization of the project of world literature, and the critical reactions against it. He underscores the challenges faced by researchers invested in establishing a critico-theoretical paradigm open to cultural diversity and complex transnational inscriptions, less unilateral and ethnocentric while capable of accounting for the dynamic challenges posed to scholars by today’s international translation market. Rather than giving up on the project of world literature in the face of the sense of dissatisfaction brought up by some of its hegemonic institutionalization, Guerrero’s proposal is to double down on it and reorient its methodology towards modes of collective intellectual labor inspired by multicultural discursive formations. He suggests that this re-articulation of world literary research could be particularly fruitful in the case of large-scale studies of international literary circulation and the historical and material processes of translation, publishing, and reception.

Based on reflections drawn from Claude Lévi-Strauss’ La Pensée sauvage, Nora Catelli’s article, “Los críticos como bricoleurs: unas observaciones” states the need to rethink the changed historical conditions of possibility of theoretical discursivity today. Catelli argues that contemporary theoretical practices are defined by fragmentation, and thus critics have become bricoleurs freed from having to adhere to particular philosophical schools or theoretical frameworks. Instead, they combine concepts from varied sources according to what the objects at hand demand. In fact, Catelli argues that literary criticism today is set in motion without any self-imposed finality, driven by the productive instability of aesthetic value, liberated from the mechanism of epistemological control that used to found its discursivity. In support of her hypothesis, Catelli examines
certain features in the expository strategies of authors with an overwhelming presence in literary scholarship today, such as Jacques Rancière and Giorgio Agamben; she shows how their theoretical gambits contain a return to philology or to a philosophy of language. To conclude, Catelli suggests that her reflections may work, not so much to exorcise this or that theoretical trend, but to insist on the need of positing the disciplinary horizon of literary studies (world literary or not) in relation to a demand of being structured as a system, and organized around the defense of its institutional specificity, which according to Catelli consists first and foremost in confronting language as a form, and the history of literature as a problem constituted in the intersection between criticism and comparison.

The second section, entitled “Challenging hegemonies: the local, material grounds of world literature”, groups three articles. In “Parochialism from below: on World Literature’s other other”, Héctor Hoyos proposes a resemanticization of the term parochialism as a resource for overcoming the cosmopolitanism/nationalism and global/local dichotomies that have burdened literary and cultural debates of late. Through the analysis of two poems by Leon De Greiff and their possible translations, Hoyos argues that the “parish”, in its reformulation, is only partially burdened with something as ethnic as the nation, as geographical as the region, or as narrow-minded as the province. Parochialism is neither determined by, nor separate from ethnic groups and recognizes the power of place without being blinded by it. Finally, although it seems to oppose cosmopolitanism – as that which occurs on a large scale – parochialism is not contrary to it. A good parishioner, Hoyos claims, can in fact be a cosmopolitan too.

Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado’s “La literatura mundial como praxis: apuntes hacia una metodología de lo concreto” looks into a conference given by Juan Rulfo in 1965 in Chiapas (later published as “Situación actual del novela contemporánea”) in order to trace a world literary cartography that differs from those put forth by scholars like David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, the Warwick Collective or Pheng Cheah. Rulfo’s mapping is entirely other. Both its place of enunciation and the system of references made up of non-canonical, peripheric texts and objects point to the existence of vectors producing world literature which are invisibilized by the totalizing critical accounts of the aforementioned critics. Sánchez Prado concludes his article by proposing a methodological shift that approaches world literature not through the kind of determinism – or, in some cases, voluntarism – seen in the framework of world-systems, but rather “from below”; in other words, beginning from the ways in which concrete actors produce and practice world literature.

In the last chapter of this block, “Los mundos subalternos de la literatura mundial: hacia una comparación de las literaturas indígenas en Abya Yala/
Américas”, Anna M. Brígido-Corachán and César Domínguez underscore the enormous gap separating the field of world literature and the literature produced by indigenous peoples of Abya Yala/the Americas, which are often studied by anthropologists, historians, geographers and environmentalists, but rarely by literary critics. They find it shocking that these oral and written literatures (they are interested in a specific form they call *oraliterary*) are not part of world literature’s research and pedagogical agendas. Brígido-Corachán and Domínguez see an opportunity today to reinstitutionalize the field of Latin American literary studies via world literature, so that indigenous literatures can acquire the visibility they never had. Given the difficulty or the impossibility of working on the six hundred existing American indigenous languages, the analysis focuses on two case studies centered on the global circulation of contemporary Zapotec and Quechua poetry. One of the article’s main foci is the question of endangered languages in relation to one of comparative literature’s foundational principles: that texts must be read in the original language in order to attain a better understanding of the cultures from which they originate. They explain that translation and self-translation have been fundamental for the preservation of most known pre-Columbian texts, as well as for inscribing indigenous writing in global literary circuits. The authors emphasize the fact that indigenous writers create their texts both in indigenous and hegemonic languages, which are fundamental both for comparative and world literature. In conclusion, they argue that a real world literature should reform itself in order to be able to account for the “oralitura” created by Abya Yala/the Americas’s indigenous authors, and to read these textual formations and *oraliterary* practices in relation to the demands for justice and greater recognition at the center of their cultural production.

The third section is entitled “Figuring and reconfiguring the political in world literature” and is comprised of three texts. In the first one, “World literature/liberal globalization. Notes for a materialistic metacritique of Weltliterary studies”, Jorge J. Locane presents seven sections or notes in order to propose a critical reflection on Weltliterary studies in relation to the course that they have taken since Casanova, Moretti, and Damrosch sparked the current debate since the late 1990s. Based on the examination of world literature’s material conditions of enunciation, Locane argues that the emergence of global frameworks within literary studies were determined by specific transformations experienced by the publishing industry during that seminal decade. Accordingly, the theoretical discussions of world literature that have shaped the field can be seen as a superstructural phenomenon functional to the interests of a concentrated publishing industry hailing from metropolitan capitals. Locane concludes the article by suggesting a terminological reformulation capable of overcoming national and philological boundaries while resisting the hegemony of a liberal cosmopolitan notion of
world literature bent on accommodating the interest of global publishing groups and markets. Instead of world literature, he proposes the study of “pluriversal literatures”, which he understands as a heterogeneous corpus produced in the world and not for the world. The concept highlights the need to read these literary texts within their contexts of production, accounting for their multiple geocultural locations aside from metropolitan industrial mediations. However, he ends the piece by suggesting that “the most prudent thing to do today would be to discard all terminological speculation and overwrought adjectives to finally talk simply about literature”.

In “The Global Alt-Write or why we should read reactionary (world) literature”, Benjamin Loy argues that as a result of a devotion to reading literature based on paradigms of liberal cosmopolitanism and neoliberal globalization, recent approaches to world literature have barely addressed the question of how to treat texts that do not conform (aesthetically and/or ideologically) to the predefined notion of world literature, but that nevertheless unequivocally exist and circulate at a global scale. In this way, Loy intends to question some of world literature studies’ optimistic positions as their hypotheses are confronted with other kinds of texts, asking questions like the following: How can we approach literature’s capacity to “globalize” (Cheah) if this also applies to “reactionary” worlds? What kind of “alternative” networks of editors and readers are contributing to the international diffusion of these sorts of “reactionary” texts and ideas? How do writers occupy certain “reactionary” or right-wing positions within national and international literary fields? And what importance should be assigned to this “Global Alt-Write” in the context of teaching world literature? In the face of today’s both political and ideological worldwide reactionary backlash, Loy’s article investigates the forms that a more critical notion of world literature could take, based on examples and case studies from European and New World contexts.

The third and last text in this section is Alexandra Ortiz Wallner’s “Testimonio y literaturas del mundo. Notas para un debate”. The author explores how the production and circulation of knowledge within the critical frame of subaltern studies opened up back-and-forth dynamics within a wealth of concepts between sites of enunciation marked by an East/West and North/South geopolitics of localized knowledge. Ortiz Wallner studies the circulation of testimonio beyond Latin America, in the Global South, that is, the Sur/South axis through which, at the same time, she politicizes and specifies the notion of world literature. She concentrates on a network of intellectual exchanges between Central America and India during the Cold War, by looking into the global mobility and resignification of testimonio as a South-South epistemology that facilitated exchanges structured by research questions brought up by
subaltern studies. By looking into the Global South leftist feminist network that emerged during the Cold War and the discursive production that constitutes it, Ortiz Wallner brings to the surface an “other” world literature overlooked by the institutionalized archive of world literary studies. She concludes the piece by arguing for the need to trace forgotten modes of circulation and genres deemed “minor” in order to open up a space of critical enunciation for world literature capable of resisting the normative and totalizing forces that structure hegemonic discourses of world literature.

The fourth section of the volume, “Dislocating temporal, geographical and environmental mediations”, is also made up of three texts. In the opening essay, “Más allá del mundo: imaginación transtemporal para un cierto modo de habitar los confines”, Alejandra Laera traces three ways of understanding world literature that have organized the field since the 1990s and are now in crisis: world literature as a way of reading, as a functioning system, and as motivation (as global drive and transnational motif). Laera concentrates on the Southern cone literary manifestations of a generalized crisis of worldly spatial imaginaries that results in a temporal notion (rather than spatial) of globality. She explains that the post-global contemporary condition is structured around the notions transtemporality, heterochrony and altertemporality which render visible the coexistence, overlapping and muddled accounts of an addition of local worlds undone by an accelerated or decelerated experience of time brought up by ecological catastrophes, war and destruction or subjective trauma. Through a careful reading of the novel Leñador by Mike Wilson, Laera suggests that the post-global horizon of this and other novels published in Argentina and Chile by authors writing elsewhere, points to a process of deglobalization (“desmundialización”) signified by a broken down temporality – decelerated, repetitive, minimal time or altertime.

In “Reading without habits: a caribbean contribution to World Literature”, Guillermina De Ferrari invokes Paul Gilroy to remind us that ships brought slaves to the Caribbean, but they also transported the subversive, displaced and recontextualized books that contributed to its cultural hybridity and whose reception under specifically cosmopolitan readerly conditions also gave rise to the possibility of resistance and revolution in the region. De Ferrari’s essay is particularly interested in these moments of Caribbean cosmopolitan “bad” readings (interrupted reading, misreading, nonreading), and she traces these scenes in novels by Alejo Carpentier, Leonardo Padura, Marlon James and Mayra Montero in order to interrogate the opacities and misunderstandings at stake when imagining an Other, but also to think through the felicitous and dangerous consequences of dehistoricizing otherness in order to open up geographies of temporal cohabitation across cultural differences. She finishes her article proposing a Caribbean
inspired world literature made up of readers without reading habits who subvert (and revolutionize) the intended, established meaning of the text.

Reading two (a priori) world literary novels by Joan Benesiu and Gabi Martínez which portray cosmopolitan characters immersed in what the novel presents as wild, untouched natural spaces, Marta Puxan-Oliva’s “The challenges of wild spaces to world literary cosmopolitanism” explores the mutual dislocations of new cosmopolitan discourses invested in ethically subverting processes of globalization, and ecocritical approaches to literature. Tracing representations of Tierra del Fuego and Sudd as natural pre- or post-political spaces of radical wilderness, Puxan-Oliva elucidates the complex ways in which the ethico-political and biosocial intersect in these novels. Her interpretation of the novels allows her to second-guess the politically progressive efficacy of world literature when trying to reconcile cosmopolitan demands and environmental concerns, that is, when examining the cosmopolitical efficacy promised by world literary approaches to literature.

The fifth and final section, “Precarious worlds: thinking through the crisis of cosmopolitanism”, gathers two texts. In “The contemporary cosmopolitan condition: borders and world literature”, Alejandra Uslenghi begins by historicizing a new brand of empirical, plural, descriptive, postcolonial cosmopolitanism from below that emerged in the 1990s as a response to a normative and rather abstract, institutional, disinterested, humanitarian and universalistic cosmopolitan ethical imagination. Uslenghi deploys this particularized cosmopolitanism of the underprivileged to think about the technological infrastructures that lend themselves to experiment with the reproduction and distribution of cosmopolitan narratives and images at an unprecedented speed, connecting local events with a worldwide audience through multiple platforms, and that may allow for brief moments of communal empathy and grieving. She concentrates on a literary and visual essay by Teju Cole about the conditions of migrants attempting to cross the United States/Mexican border, which he published entirely on a Twitter account especially created for this purpose, on March 13, 2014. She concludes her piece by vindicating a concept of cosmopolitanism like Cole’s, capable of effecting a “societal shift in the treatment of marginalized people” and of bringing the experience of the border home “closer, accessible and comprehensible”.

The section and the book concludes with Mariano Siskind’s “Towards a cosmopolitanism of loss: an essay about the end of the world”. Siskind’s text attempts to recalibrate the political potential of the discourse of cosmopolitanism today, during a historical juncture defined by the total collapse of the imaginary function modernity had assigned to the world – the world understood as the symbolic structure that used to sustain humanistic, cosmopolitan imaginaries of universal emancipation, equality and justice. The world today can no longer
fulfill the role of a feasible signifying horizon for cultural and aesthetic forms of cosmopolitan agency. The generalized experience of crisis that defines the present (which Siskind calls “the experience of the end of the world”) renders evident the obsolescence of world literature, cosmopolitanism and globalization, which depended on an affirmative notion of the world as the ground for cosmopolitan cultural exchanges and translations that set the foundation for a universal (intellectual) community to come based on justice and equality, or for the capitalistic extraction of surplus literary and economic value and for the commodification of style, ideas and subject positions. Through a detailed reading of Roberto Bolaño’s “El Ojo Silva”, Siskind argues that this particular understanding of cosmopolitanism and world literature is untenable in the face of the end of the world: it has exhausted its ability to account for relevant contemporary engagements with the present state of suffering in what used to be the world. The essay ends with a polemical proposal regarding the role literature and the humanities could fulfill in the context of the structural suffering that defines what he calls the end of the world.

We do not want to conclude this introduction without expressing our gratitude, in particular to the European Research Council (ERC) for their generous financial support, and to the researchers in the project “Reading Global. Constructions of World Literature and Latin America”. We would also like to thank the researchers Benjamin Loy, Jorge J. Locane, Judith Illerhaus, Silja Helber, and Yehua Chen for the work they invested in the preparation of our symposium. Finally, we would like to thank Marion Schotsch, Jorge Vitón, Jordan Lee Schnee, and Jorge J. Locane for correcting this volume.

As mentioned above, this volume is based on a meeting that took place at the University of Cologne on January 24th and 25th, 2018, in the form of an “Exploratory Seminar”. It was part of a cooperative program between the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard University and the “Reading Global” project. For the occasion, we employed an experimental format that only allowed for very brief presentations in order to leave a lot of room for discussion. We are very grateful to the participants for their commitment to the experiment, which is reflected in turn in the contributions to this volume.