

CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE Diversity and Translated Fiction in the UK Publishing Industry

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Abstract – Though sales from translated fiction in the UK are worth £20 million per year with a growth of 5.5% per annum, thus outpacing the rest of the publishing industry, focus on literature translated into English has begun to shift from quantity (see, for example, Büchler, Trentacosti 2015) to questions of diversity (see Chitnis *et al.* 2017). The often-quoted 3% figure, which has traditionally represented the proportion of literature in English originally written in other languages, has risen more recently to around 5% (see Anderson 2019). However, continued emphasis on this statistic risks eclipsing other issues of diversity, and a growing number of voices in both academic and industry contexts have drawn attention to the imperative to address this. Particular areas of discussion are the lack of gender equality, with less than a third of books published in translation being authored by women (see Derbyshire 2016), and linguistic/geopolitical bias, with some regions and languages being much better represented than others (see Patel, Youssef 2022). These issues of diversity are indicative of broader concerns within the publishing industry, where research suggests that diversity has plateaued (Joynson 2021). In this article we aim to identify some of the factors that contribute to the continued lack of diversity in literature translated into English, through the lens of the two activist initiatives with which we have been involved. These have potential to make a significant contribution to changing the landscape of literature in translation, but we will also consider their possible limitations, and where work still needs to be done.

Keywords: translated fiction; diversity; PEN Presents; Warwick Prize for Women in Translation; publishing industry.

1. Introduction

In an impassioned plea to the publishing industry in 2021, editor Eleanor Dryden called on stakeholders to “publish beyond bias” (Dryden 2021), by addressing multiple and insidious instances of bias inherent to decisions and practices. This ethos of “publishing beyond bias” guides our approach in this article. Our scrutiny of imbalances in translated literature has been shaped by two recent initiatives with which we have been closely involved: (1) In 2017 the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation (WPWiT) was established at the University of Warwick by Chantal Wright, in response to male-dominated

literary prize lists.¹ The WPWiT has the potential to make significant positive changes by showcasing new writing by women in translation and raising the profile of authors, translators, and writing from under-represented regions and social groups. (2) In 2021 Helen Vassallo began working with English PEN (a worldwide writers' association that facilitates and promotes the translation into English of published works in foreign languages) on the new digital publishing initiative PEN Presents, which funds and promotes samples of translated literature not yet available in full English translation.

While these and other activist interventions have been crucial in raising awareness of existing and pervasive imbalances in the commission and publication of literature in translation, they have revealed further biases that need attention. For example, recent studies by Margaret Carson (2019, 2020) have provided evidence of the ongoing barriers to gender parity in translation, and a new collection of essays on translation edited by Kavita Bhanot and Jeremy Tiang (2022) has highlighted the extent to which racial and geopolitical bias are additional barriers.

In the first part of the article, we will analyse the pool of submissions and the shortlists for the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation for the period 2017 to 2022. We will also consider shortlisted translators' responses to a questionnaire that aimed to identify the factors and agents that contribute to the publication and success of translated titles written by women.

The second part of the article will focus on PEN Presents, a digital platform showcasing funded translation samples of original and diverse literature not yet available in full English translation. Its ambitious aim is to shift the landscape of translated literature, mobilising PEN's global networks to ensure the widest possible range of representation and to effect cultural change in the ways in which translated literature is commissioned and promoted in the UK and beyond.

2. The Warwick Prize for Women in Translation: gender and bibliodiversity

2.1. Bibliodiversity beyond gender?

The WPWiT is an annual prize that is awarded to a literary work² authored by a woman, translated into English by a translator or translators of any gender,

¹ Chantal Wright's personal involvement with the Prize ended in 2022.

² The Prize accepts entries in a wide variety of genres: literary fiction (novels, novellas, and short stories), poetry, literary non-fiction, works of fiction for children and young adults, graphic novels and play texts. The rules on eligibility have shifted since 2017: play texts were added to the list of eligible genres in 2018 following lobbying by theatre translators; multi-author anthologies are now no longer eligible; self-translations have become eligible. See the Prize's website (University of Warwick 2020) for full details of eligibility, terms, and conditions.

and which must have been published in the UK or Ireland within the twelve months preceding a given year's submission period. The prize was established at the University of Warwick in 2017 with internal funds from the University's Connecting Cultures Global Research Priority. It received additional funding from 2020 onwards from the British Centre for Literary Translation, the British Comparative Literature Association and the Warwick Institute of Engagement. It has been judged by the same team of judges since 2017: Susan Bassnett, Amanda Hopkinson, and Boyd Tonkin. The Prize came into being against the background of a pre-existing Women in Translation movement and grew out of a grassroots movement led by a number of women in the Anglophone literary translation community who were aware that female authors were underrepresented both as a percentage of books translated and on literary shortlists.³ The reflections and analysis here focus on the first six years of the Prize's existence, from 2017 to 2022, and draw on statistics gathered by the University of Warwick during the submissions process and on written interviews conducted with shortlisted translators.⁴

The number of eligible entries submitted to the Prize increased substantially and more or less consistently between 2017 and 2022, rising from 58 to 138, with a total of 587 eligible entries over the six-year period. The focus of this small case study will not be on the potential role played by the Prize in increasing awareness of the underrepresentation of women in translation. This is impossible to establish and ultimately of much less interest than other issues hinted at by the statistics gathered under the auspices of the Prize. Rather, in reviewing the statistics and in conducting a small-scale survey of the translators who were shortlisted for the Prize between 2017 and 2022, we were curious to see whether it would be possible to:

- analyse the relationship between the submissions and the shortlist from the perspective of quantifiable bibliodiversity beyond gender; in other words, all of the submissions are authored by women, but how does source language factor in?
- identify the major forces or agents involved in bringing a translated work to publication in English, particularly where a work enjoys a certain level of success such as being shortlisted for the WPWiT; come to some

³ On the background to the establishment of the prize, see, for example, Anderson (2013), Bernofsky (2014), Derbyshire (2014), Jaquette (2016), Cain (2017). Women in Translation month was established by Meytal Radzinski in 2014. See Radzinski's Women in Translation website (*WiT* 2023) for detailed statistics and further background.

⁴ These statistics are freely accessible at the WPWiT website. An error found in the Warwick statistics has been corrected for the purposes of this paper: this was a title translated from German that was submitted both in 2020 and 2021 and listed twice; the double listing likely implies that the title was not eligible in 2020 on the basis of its publication date and was re-entered for the prize in the following year. This brings the total number of entries down from the official count of 588 to 587.

conclusions about the relationship between these forces and agents and bibliodiversity.

2.2. Analysing the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation statistics

Table 1 in the Annexes shows the total number of entries by source language, the percentage of total entries by source language, the total number of shortlisted entries by source language, and the percentage of the combined shortlists by source language. Table 2 in the Annexes shows the number of entries divided into European and non-European languages.⁵ Both the label *source language* and the division into European and non-European languages necessarily lack nuance (and do not take account of less quantifiable characteristics such as the author's sexuality, race, class, age, and so on) but nonetheless serve as a rough barometer of publishing trends.⁶ It goes without saying or resorting to a footnote that categorisation by source language hides a multiplicity of complexities ranging from the gazumping character of former colonial languages, through the realities of exophonic and diasporic lives, to the nature of metropolitan publishing. The language in which a book is written, be it French, Spanish, Chinese, or indeed German, cannot automatically entail an assumption about an author's cultural or linguistic origins, the past or current geographical centre of their life, nor about the geographical focus of their work.⁷ That said, what we can see from the statistics is that French, German, Spanish and Swedish account for 44.26% of entries to the prize and that Western European languages dominate submissions at around 80%. By contrast, Chinese, Japanese and Korean account for only 10.89% of entries and non-European languages overall account for only just under 20%. All languages other than the 'big European four' submitted fewer than 30 entries each in total over the six years. The list of entries undoubtedly reveals a

⁵ The languages identified as non-European for the purposes of this analysis are: Amharic, Arabic, Armenian, Bangla, Bengali, Chinese, Farsi, Georgian, Hebrew, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Kyrgyz, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tigrinya, Turkish, and Urdu.

⁶ As Olga Castro and Helen Vassallo note, "the geopolitics of women's writing is just one aspect of diversity [...] we must remember all the different social categories (such as race, class, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual identity, etc.) that intersect with gender to create intertwined systems of privilege and discrimination" (Castro, Vassallo 2020, p. 139).

⁷ It was not possible, within the framework of this short-term research project, to nuance the WPWiT statistics to reflect these kinds of complexities. However, a brief look at the questionnaires completed for 18 of the 40 titles on the shortlists hints at this complexity: *The House with the Stained-Glass Window* is a book written in Polish by a Ukrainian; the author of *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* is Japanese but writes in German; author Scholastique Mukasonga was born in Rwanda but writes in French; writer Yan Ge writes in Chinese but lives in Ireland.

Eurocentric bias in UK and Irish literature-in-translation:⁸ with a few exceptions, the further east and south of Western Europe one travels, the smaller the level of representation in translation.

Analysis of the shortlists in terms of their relationship to the breakdown of entries by language shows that French and Spanish underperform on the shortlists given their dominance of the submissions. German overperforms, as does Polish – quite significantly. Six out of a modest total of ten Polish competition entries found their way onto the shortlists. Certain languages with large numbers of overall entries – Dutch, Norwegian, Danish – are notable by their complete absence from the shortlists. Catalan, Chinese, Croatian, Farsi, Greek, Hindi, Irish and Russian all have fewer than 20 entries each across the six years; all “overperform” on the shortlists given this small pool of titles. Arabic, Italian, Japanese and Korean all “underperform” in relation to their pool of entries.

Consideration of other features of the shortlists reveals that independent publishers are in the absolute majority whereas imprints of large publishing conglomerates barely feature. Four translators appear more than once on the shortlists; Polish to English translator Antonia Lloyd-Jones is the most shortlisted translator with three separate titles. German is the most represented language on the shortlists. Titles translated from European languages account for 80% of the shortlists; titles from non-European languages account for 20%. In this respect, the Eurocentric bias of the shortlists exactly reflects the dominance of European languages on the level of submissions.

The questionnaires sent to the shortlisted translators took account of these observations and attempted to probe certain hypotheses. Though it is generally assumed within the literary translation community that independent publishers are more interested in literature-in-translation and in bibliodiversity than other types of publishers, does this imply active commissioning or rather receptivity? Who was responsible for bringing the Women in Translation-shortlisted titles to publication? Given the presence of these independent publishers on the shortlists and given the dominance of books from languages that have an active system of state cultural support, is it possible to identify the role of subventions in the success of translated titles? What can we read into the recurrence of certain translators on the lists? How invested are translators in bibliodiversity?

⁸ The Prize is not open to publishers based outside the UK and Ireland. This was mainly motivated by an inverse economy of scale: initially it was unclear whether making North American publishers eligible would overwhelm the infrastructure of a small-scale Prize with both a modest budget and level of staffing. The reality of global Anglophone publishing, however, means that many titles appear on both sides of the Atlantic in different imprints and that titles from small publishing houses based outside the main publishing centres, e.g. V&Q Books in Berlin, are unfortunately excluded.

Shortlisted translators were asked a series of questions aimed at establishing their career stage, their role in bringing the shortlisted title to publication, whether the title received any financial, promotional or other support pre- or post-publication, or had been nominated or won any other prizes, either in the source language or in translation, and the extent to which bibliodiversity had featured in the translator's decision to translate the book. The term *bibliodiversity* was left deliberately undefined in the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were received for 18 of 39 titles, representing 15 translators, so the statistical sample is small.⁹ Nonetheless, the questionnaires reveal some interesting trends and suggest avenues for fruitful lines of enquiry with larger data samples.

The questionnaires show that eight of the responding translators self-describe as 'established' or 'experienced', two as mid-career, and five as either early career or emerging.¹⁰ Ten of the shortlisted titles had been pitched by translators to publishers; four of the titles had been commissioned; four titles fell into a different category where factors such as personal relationships and the simultaneous efforts of multiple parties were decisive. Ten of eighteen titles received some kind of financial support, either in the form of support for a sample translation – types of actors specifically mentioned here include source-language publishers, English PEN and the PEN/Heim grants – or in the form of translation subventions to Anglophone publishers from national cultural institutions – specific mention was made of the Goethe Institut, the Polish Book Institute, the Finnish Literature Exchange and the Institut Ramon Llull – or in one case by a private individual. Ten of the shortlisted titles were the recipients of other honours at home or abroad, either pre- or post-publication of the translation, whereas eight were not. The responses to the open question on bibliodiversity were intriguing: only six respondents discussed the fact that their translated title was written by a woman. The majority of respondents defined or understood bibliodiversity in terms of language or geography, namely, their decision to translate was motivated primarily or in the main by the underrepresentation of the language and/or region from which they were translating, rather than by gender or other forms of diversity: a comment such as "I consider any translations from Language Y to add to Anglophone literature's bibliodiversity" was fairly typical. Many translators also stated that their relationship to the book in question was a significant factor, commenting variously that "I simply fell in love with the vivid writing style"; "what truly

⁹ One title on the shortlist, *The Coast Road*, was omitted from the questionnaires as it was a collection of poetry with multiple translators. Three further titles on the shortlist were co-translated: in one case both translators were asked to respond jointly; in two cases only one translator was asked to respond.

¹⁰ Some translators felt that their career stage had shifted between the time of shortlisting and the present day. Unfortunately, the question about career stage did not specify whether it was asking for career stage at time of shortlisting or at present; this question would need to be more precise in future research.

mattered to me was working on a book that I would find engaging as a translator”; “I look only for quality”; “My main motivation was that I love the complex, emotional weirdness of Author B’s writing”; “basically I liked the story and the way she wrote it”; and “Just picked her because her work blew my mind”.

What might we conclude from the statistics and from the questionnaires? Firstly, it is important to delineate the sphere of influence of the WPWiT. The Prize is not responsible for the number and type of entries made to the competition. The ‘big European four’ dominate the entries and this domination clearly translates to the shortlists, but even within this group the transfer of influence is not straightforwardly representative. It is at the longlisting and shortlisting stages that the tastes and ‘biases’ of the judging panel come into play. The shortlists are undoubtedly skewed towards European languages, but the analysis above shows that the under- and over-performance of certain languages paints a complex picture. The questionnaires underline the fact that the role of translators in pitching and selling titles cannot be underestimated. The majority of the translators interviewed self-describe as experienced; the recurrence of certain translators may suggest translational ‘talent’, a good nose for which titles will succeed on the market,¹¹ and/or name recognition of translators on the part of the judges. The translation market clearly relies quite heavily on a system of subventions for its success but the questionnaires reveal that financial support is not always a decisive factor in the success of a title. What is striking is that the shortlisted translators are largely interested in translating stories that they like and championing ‘their’ language rather than in other forms of bibliodiversity. For those translating from underrepresented languages, which in the Anglophone world implies anything from Hungarian to Indonesian, intersectional bibliodiversity is simply a happy by-product of managing to see a translation through to publication.

If, as the questionnaires unsurprisingly suggest, translators in the UK and Ireland are instrumental in getting non-Anglophone literature published in translation, the question of who these translators are and how they came to acquire their languages is key. The dominance of the big European four must reflect the fact that French, German and Spanish have traditionally been the most-taught languages in UK and Irish schools and are the languages of the isles’ largest neighbours to the West. Swedish falls out of this supposition: Scandinavian languages are not typically taught in schools, though Scandinavian literature and culture – from noir to hygge – have been fashionable in the English-speaking world for some decades. Conversely, we might assume that rarer languages rely on heritage speakers, L2 translators, or on L1 translators whose personal history has brought them into contact with a

¹¹ It should be noted here that the market does not always know what it wants or needs. One translator noted that a title by an author who went on to enjoy global success was pitched for 10 years before finding a home.

language not acquired through formal education.¹² If translated literature is to become more diverse, we need more translators of underrepresented languages, and this means more translators from these three categories. This is where initiatives need to focus their efforts, and this is precisely where PEN Presents steps in.

3. PEN Presents: shifting the landscape of literature in translation

3.1. *An agent-based approach to bibliodiversity*

PEN Presents is a digital platform that aims to shift the landscape of translated literature in the UK. Applications are invited twice a year for an issue showcasing and funding sample translations of work as yet unpublished in English; each year one issue has a specific focus in terms of geographical region, language or other characteristic, and the other is an ‘open call’ round.¹³ Prior to the launch of PEN Presents, English PEN undertook extensive consultation with publishers, translators, agents, scouts, festival organisers and other stakeholders to determine what the obstacles were to commissioning a greater diversity of literature in translation, and what stakeholders considered to be the priorities in challenging these obstacles. A primary outcome of this research and development phase was the importance of *discoverability* as a significant obstacle to greater diversity in translated literature: publishers noted the challenge of finding non-mainstream authors and books; agents and scouts observed an uneven distribution of infrastructure in terms of geographic context; translators expressed the difficulty of presenting work where there were not established channels to editors. All stakeholders stressed the importance of sample translations in pitching and acquiring translated literature, confirming the need for an intervention such as PEN Presents.

This research builds on outcomes of the 2011 Global Translation Initiative (GTI),¹⁴ a collaboration between stakeholders in the publishing industry whose findings indicated the need to undertake targeted research into barriers facing specific languages and regions. The GTI found that obstacles throughout the chain of production come from perceptions of the different ‘groups’ of stakeholders, and also highlighted a chronic lack of funding for translated literature. This broad conclusion has more specific implications

¹² See Collischonn (2023) on the phenomenon of literary translation by L2 translators.

¹³ Issue 1 focused on the languages of India and was delivered by English PEN in collaboration with the British Council. Issue 2 was an ‘open call’ volume, delivered by English PEN in collaboration with Vassallo via funding from the University of Exeter’s Open Innovation Platform, and a network grant awarded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

¹⁴ For the report, see Dalkey Archive Press (2011).

revealed by our research: uneven distribution of financial support across languages and geographic contexts has a significant impact on the kinds of literature(s) made available in translation (see Forrester in Schnee 2023), and on who these literatures represent. This indicates a direct correlation between lack of funding in source cultures and lack of diversity in translation, a finding upheld by recent reports by the British Council on literature translated from languages of India (Murray, Dhanwani, Ramalingam 2022) and by Highlight Arts on literature translated from Arabic (Fayed, Guthrie, Halls 2021).¹⁵

Two further (and related) outcomes emerged from the consultation: firstly, that funding the labour of sample translations is vital to increase accessibility to the literary translation community; secondly, that stakeholders from across the sector identify lack of communication channels as an impediment to bibliodiversity. The first point highlights one of the fundamental problems in terms of diversity within translated literature: commissioning editors and agents are unlikely to purchase rights for a book if they cannot read a sample,¹⁶ and yet the nature of creating a sample means that it occurs pre-commission, and therefore equates to unpaid labour. This immediately privileges those who might be in a more stable financial position, compounding an existing assumption on the part of stakeholders throughout the chain of production, and highlighted by Gitanjali Patel and Nariman Youssef in their statement that “[t]ranslators are presumed to be white. Their English that of the educated middle classes” (Patel, Youssef 2022, p.17). This assumption was challenged in the first round of PEN Presents, during which feedback from the selection panel included the imperative to ensure that outreach for the calls should include – and, if possible, deliberately target – L2 translators, or individuals who might not consider themselves translators (such as those working with heritage languages, or those yet to secure their first publishing contract). The commitment to do so going forward consciously engages with the issue of literary translation as a primarily white and middle-class field, avoiding the kind of tokenistic commitment to diversity that Patel and Youssef critique (pp. 22-23), which in reality others and erases translators of colour.¹⁷

¹⁵ This is further corroborated by Megan Clarke’s research (2022), in which she also points to the importance of funding for smaller publishing houses. It also problematises the correlation between subvention and success noted in the previous section, as it immediately creates inequalities between literary cultures.

¹⁶ It is not enough here to point to bilingual commissioning editors as a solution: even those who are bilingual are likely to have a more mainstream language as their second language, and even if this is not the case, it still limits the potential commission to books in the language(s) in which they are proficient.

¹⁷ Kavita Bhanot has problematised eloquently this over-simplification of complex diversity issues in her landmark essay “Decolonise, not Diversify” (Bhanot 2015). Bhanot points to the damage that can be done if ‘diversity’ is reduced to a box-ticking initiative that deals only with the superficial aspects of the problem in terms of representation, rather than a fundamental shift in the

This focus on people – who is included in the literary translation community, and who is excluded from it – connects to the second point emerging from the research and development phase for PEN Presents: the lack of communication channels between different stakeholders, and the importance of fostering dialogue at an earlier stage in the chain of commission and production. This confirms the findings of a recent research project by Megan Clarke, which highlighted the absence of brokers between independent foreign publishers and their Anglophone counterparts as a significant impediment to diversity in translated literature (see Clarke 2022). Our research showed that this is also true of the lack of intermediaries between publishers and translators, or translators and agents. All those interviewed as part of our scoping project emphasised the importance of dialogue and outreach in the response to these challenges, in order to secure a more diverse representation of territories and voices and greater support for translated work emerging from contexts without existing pathways to international funding and distribution.¹⁸ PEN Presents thus functions as the intermediary or ‘broker’ that Clarke identifies as essential for greater diversity, and begins to respond to the absence of communication channels noted by stakeholders. Crucially, it also addresses the question of inclusion, as the outreach for the programme actively attempts to reach people not currently part of existing networks, drawing on PEN’s global partners to gain access to translators outside the UK system. In an interview at the time of the shortlist announcement for the second round of PEN Presents, English PEN’s Translation and International Manager Will Forrester spoke of the possible contributions of the programme in the following way:

The freedoms to read and write provoke the questions *Who gets to read? Who gets to write?* and therefore *Who gets to translate? Who gets to be translated?* Addressing the structural barriers and inequities that are at the bottom of these prompts is a part of promoting such freedoms, and of recognizing that they are only thoroughgoing freedoms if they are equal freedoms for all. (Forrester in Schnee 2023)

Addressing the “structural barriers and inequities” evoked by Forrester acts against the superficial diversity initiatives critiqued by Bhanot and by Patel and Youssef. The notion of “equal freedoms for all” underpins the ethos of PEN Presents and our research collaboration: not only does it underline the importance of individuals within systems, but also it reinforces the notion that

way that we think. However, it will be equally important to bear in mind that ‘white’ and ‘middle-class’ are separate categories of privilege (which can of course coincide), and that it should not be assumed that all white translators are middle-class and all translators of colour underprivileged – this would result in a different but no less damaging over-simplification of diversity issues.

¹⁸ This means extending networks beyond their existing form, so that the potential openness of a network does not end up ensuring its ‘closedness’ to those who are not already part of it. For further discussion of the need to avoid complacency in existing networks, see Vassallo (2022, pp. 97-119).

equality is about more than a box-ticking inclusivity exercise, and that for systems to change then the people within them need to change. As Bhanot (2015) opines, “[t]he concept of diversity only exists if there is an assumed neutral point from which ‘others’ are ‘diverse’”: it is crucial, then, that the emphasis on bibliodiversity should distance itself from the idea that there is a ‘neutral’ yardstick by which a text’s diversity can or should be measured (whether this is in terms of subject matter or, as Patel and Youssef note, the kind of English(es) used to translate it). An active focus on “equal freedoms for all” also responds to a problem highlighted by Patel and Youssef, who assert that

[m]igrating across linguistic and cultural borders means the translated text faces the same challenges as the migrant person in a new land: lack of belonging, pressure to assimilate, threats of erasure. It depends on where the text is migrating from. Some may find it easier to enter, easier to blend in. Other texts are held at the border and forced to prove their worth. (Patel, Youssef 2022, p. 26)

By likening the movement of texts to the movement of bodies,¹⁹ Patel and Youssef point to the importance of individuals and the systems within which they operate in both preventing and allowing books, and their authors and translators, to cross from one context to another. It is this deeply embedded unconscious bias, disguised as a benevolent neutrality, that must be undone for real change to occur.

3.2. Undoing unconscious bias: the geopolitics of ‘fitting in’

A key consideration of any move to implement diversity is to examine and challenge unconscious bias as well as more obvious forms of bias.²⁰ A useful way to approach this in the context of commissioning more diverse books is by analysing obstacles to their commission. At a panel in the Literary Translation Centre of London Book Fair 2023,²¹ commissioning editor Lisette Verhagen reiterated the crucial role of a sample in acquiring books, noting that a sample of around 7,000 words would be ideal for an editor to get a sense of the book. This ties in with the issues noted above regarding unpaid labour – at Translators Association observed rates, this equates to over £700 of labour. Even if a translator is in a position to carry out this labour – an essential part of securing a contract, and so an essential part of getting a foothold in the

¹⁹ For further development of this topic, see Mounzer (2017).

²⁰ For an in-depth examination of unconscious gender bias, see Vassallo (2022, pp. 1-21). For further insight into how racial bias is manifest in the translated literature sector of the publishing industry, a field dominated by “middle-class whiteness” (Bhanot, Tiang 2022, p. 8), see Patel, Youssef (2022) and Hur (2022). For an account of how gender and racial bias intersect in attitudes towards translation and translated literature, see Hussain (2022).

²¹ “Creating Samples and Getting Projects Acquired” (London Book Fair, 18 April 2023).

profession – choosing a more risky or challenging text might offer less security in terms of receiving a positive response from publishers, and so this becomes another way in which more mainstream texts remain dominant through the structures that promote them and prop them up. One stakeholder commenting on a shortlisted text for the second round of PEN Presents wondered where it would be placed in a bookshop: while it is entirely understandable that commissioning editors would think about the market for the book – publishing houses are, after all, businesses, and businesses need to break even in order to survive – rejecting a book based on whether or not it ‘fits’ can only perpetuate the same landscape. If a book that has no obvious place is rejected on the basis that it does not resemble other books that are more marketable, then we create a situation where the supply of those same marketable books creates a false demand, concretising the dominant voices, and churning out “more of the same”.²²

These vicious circles of marginalisation and exclusion exemplify three related trends that have recently been criticised by translators. Firstly, Nicholas Glastonbury expresses frustration with the publishers’ clichéd response of “there’s no market for this book”, as if publishers themselves do not have a role in the creation of a market. He describes the impossible situation for marginalised literatures as follows:

Publishers often chalk up these quotas²³ to lack of demand or lack of interest, as if demand itself isn’t a tautological red herring: there is no demand for literature in certain languages, so such books don’t get published, and because these books don’t get published, there is no demand for others like them. (Glastonbury 2021)²⁴

²² To address this issue and ensure that PEN Presents does not replicate such systems, a robust process has been implemented. The applications are sifted internally for eligibility, and then sent to members of the selection panel. The panel is a rotating group of seven individuals, drawn from across the literary sector and representing a range of experience and backgrounds. They select a shortlist of twelve proposals, assessing applications according to three main criteria (literary quality, strength of the proposal, and contribution to bibliodiversity). Shortlisted translators are awarded a grant to create a 5,000-word sample translation of the proposed work. The samples are assessed by readers of the source language and sent to the panel along with the reader reports. The panel then selects six samples from the shortlist as PEN Presents winners, to be showcased on the platform and promoted to publishers. The same assessment criteria apply, alongside a commitment to ensure a balanced portfolio of proposals meeting these criteria: the panel is explicitly asked to consider the diversity of forms, themes and voices represented across the shortlist and the selected samples.

²³ The ‘quotas’ to which Glastonbury refers here are typical responses of the ‘we already have a Turkish author on our books’ kind. Such attitudes reduce entire cultures to one book, a tokenism perilously disguised as progress.

²⁴ Megan Clarke indicates that this is connected to a lack of communication between different groups of stakeholders, noting that one of her key findings was that “one of the roadblocks was a lack of communication between sectors and departments. This led decision-makers to act on often inaccurate assumptions about the market and other players in the translation process” (Clarke 2022). Greater communication and expanded networks are, therefore, key to greater diversity.

Secondly, Anton Hur deconstructs the notion of the ‘mythical English reader’, a figure meant to represent the target market and harnessed by publishers and editors to reject pitches (echoing Glastonbury’s experience) or to insist on domesticating or familiarising edits to the translated text. However, the ‘actual’ reader appears to be in direct opposition to this ‘mythical English reader’, which is little more than the artificial construct of a supposedly neutral perspective that is in reality violently mainstream. Megan Clarke’s study of readers in the context of literature translated from Spanish found that the obstacles to greater diversity were not related to reader complacency, “disprov[ing] assumptions that UK book buyers are not interested in translated fiction” (Clarke 2022). This outcome is upheld by a recent survey carried out by Nielsen Books for the Booker Prize Foundation, which found that readers of translated fiction welcomed a “challenging read” and enjoyed reading “for information or knowledge” (The Booker Prizes 2023). This indicates an openness to remake existing ideas,²⁵ yet the ‘mythical English reader’ still serves as a harmful justification for rejecting more diverse books. As Patel and Youssef explain, “[t]he assumed readers that publishers cater for are undemanding and risk-averse. [...] Demands are made on behalf of these ‘core readers’ with little interrogation of the underlying assumptions about who they are and *who else is being excluded as a result*” (Patel, Youssef, 2022, p. 28, emphasis added).²⁶ The survey of ‘actual’ readers is in direct contrast to the ‘mythical’ reader(s) that pose a barrier to diversity, indicating a deep-rooted bias within the chain of commission and production.²⁷

This use of deferral in selecting or rejecting texts relates to the third criticism, from Madhu Kaza, that a book might be rejected on the basis that it is ‘not a good fit’. Kaza writes that this term is used in publishing and employment to justify exclusions that may indicate deeper problems with bias, and opines that “[i]t’s not difficult to recognise this lazy phrase as a cover for

²⁵ The survey (which drew on a control group of 3,000) also found that in 2022 male readers read more translated fiction than general fiction, though women bought marginally more translated literature than men (52% of translated fiction was purchased by women, as opposed to 48% by men).

²⁶ This was already identified as a problem in 2011, when the GTI found that “speculation about the ‘interests of readers’ has rarely been to the advantage of literary translation. Yet responses from booksellers, who have the most direct contact with readers, suggest that the actual reader bias against literary translation is minimal, and that lack of awareness, rather than active bias, is a more accurate description of the relationship of readers to translated works” (Dalkey Archive Press 2011, p. 55). The more recent research from the Booker Prize Foundation in collaboration with Nielsen BookData corroborates this, indicating an openness on the part of readers that is closed down early on in the commissioning process.

²⁷ It is also worth considering here the importance of English as a ‘gateway’ language, and the power that choices about which books to commission in translation has beyond Anglophone contexts: this can be manifest in the sense of rights being sold for translation into other languages based on a translation into English, or on circulation of texts translated into English among L2 readers of English outside Anglophone contexts.

unexamined bias. What does it mean? What is the phrase doing as a speech act other than closing the door with a feigned politeness and no explanation?” (Kaza 2022, p. 311). Kaza’s comments call to mind both specific experiences denounced by Glastonbury – “The editor wrote, ‘I don’t even have a critique to give. But, simply put, I just don’t know how to publish this book, which, as great as it sounds, feels just too small for us’” (Glastonbury in Hur 2021) – and the more general call by Dryden to “publish beyond bias” (Dryden 2021), indicating that each of us props up a biased structure every day through multiple unconscious acts. Glastonbury’s experience is an example of what Dryden critiques as “the damaging narratives and ‘normal’ decision-making parameters that exclude so many” in the publishing industry (Dryden 2021):²⁸ in this case, the book is dismissed because it was not originally written in a ‘big language’, making it ‘too small’ – a dangerous dismissal of region, language and content that shows how deeply linguistic and geopolitical bias are entrenched in the industry. Dryden’s emphasis on ‘normal’ decision-making parameters also chimes with both Kaza’s indictment of the term ‘not a good fit’ and Bhanot’s of the superficiality of diversity initiatives that encourage the “diverse” individuals to slot into a system not designed with them in mind. Doors are closed to writers, translators and their texts because they do not ‘fit’ with an unquestioned archetype of what constitutes ‘normal’, and so their exclusion is compounded: they can only ‘fit’ if they adapt to a system that does not accommodate them.

With its focus on non-mainstream voices, regions and authors, and by harnessing PEN’s global network to reach (1) publishers and communities who do not have established channels of communication to the UK system and (2) translators without established access to publishers and commissioning editors, PEN Presents offers an active response both to this exclusion and to the absence of brokers between independent foreign publishers and their Anglophone counterparts that Clarke (2022) recognises as a barrier to diversity in translated literature. Indeed, Forrester explicitly refers to this lack of communication channels as a “knot in the chain” (Forrester in Schnee 2023), confirming that obstacles to communication were a key reason for developing the PEN Presents programme. He notes of the PEN Translates grant programme (an annual competition that offers funding for the translation of books already commissioned by publishers) that “though we were expressly welcoming titles from acutely underrepresented languages and regions, we weren’t receiving these submissions from publishers, because publishers weren’t seeing these books in the first place” (Forrester in Schnee 2023).

²⁸ Glastonbury also wonders what a ‘perfect’ pitch system would look like, asking the question “What if our pitches were entitled to some amount of money from the publishers who solicit them or from organizations we might belong to, like PEN or ALTA?” (Glastonbury in Hur 2021). PEN Presents goes some way towards addressing this through its funding of translation samples and its function as intermediary between translators and publishers.

Intervening at an earlier point in the chain of production thus offers an opportunity to balance out this bias, and making PEN Presents a translator-led initiative recognises the unique positioning of translators as advocates and readers: Forrester explains that while concrete information regarding a book's success in its original context is powerful, "so is thoughtfulness and championing and heart" (Forrester in Schnee 2023). For this reason, the application form for the second round of PEN Presents shifted focus away from translator biographies and/or CVs, and instead asked applicants to explain why they were passionate about the book they were proposing, and why they were the right person to translate it.²⁹ This focus on people rather than commercial or critical success had encouraging results: the call received 125 proposals for work originally written in 51 different languages (and from 53 countries) – a spread almost as linguistically and culturally diverse as 6 years of entries to the WPWiT. The majority was literary fiction, which indicates that there is work to be done in terms of encouraging diversity of genre, but there were nonetheless submissions representing genre fiction, creative non-fiction, travel writing, poetry, YA and children's literature, and graphic novels.

In terms of the people applying, a range of translators from across the world submitted proposals, with a significant proportion of applications from heritage translators, bilingual translators, and translators of colour. This is particularly important both for bibliodiversity and for the development of the new subdiscipline of feminist translator studies outlined by Vassallo (2022). Firstly, it breaks the pattern of superficial diversity initiatives, which Bhanot suggests usually involve "reaching out for the handful of well-known names, writers, organisations that immediately come to mind, promoting them or asking them for advice and recommendations" (Bhanot 2015).³⁰ Instead, PEN Presents reaches out for the names we do not yet know, altering its questions to encourage those 'outside' the system to apply.³¹ Secondly, although this initiative is not specifically focused on gender, it advances Vassallo's blueprint for feminist translator studies, in its engagement with her assertion that this field is "concerned with how translations occur and how we can change for the better the processes and practices that bring translated literature into circulation" (Vassallo 2022, p. 147). In the final selection of seven translation

²⁹ This also allows translators to offer additional information about their own background, if they wish to do so, thereby potentially generating more data about the intersecting social characteristics that can be privileged or marginalised.

³⁰ This phenomenon is related to literature in translation when considered in the light of Glastonbury's comments on the difficulties of pitching less well-known authors, as he laments that "Why should Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak, talented though they are, be the be-all and end-all of Turkish literature in translation?" (Glastonbury in Hur 2022).

³¹ This engages with Patel and Youssef's concerns about who is excluded from the decision-making processes regarding the commission of literature in translation (Patel, Youssef 2022, p. 28).

samples for the second issue of PEN Presents,³² none of the entries were from Europe – a region that traditionally dominates the publication of literature in translation, see Anderson (2019) and Flood (2019) – and only two were from European languages.³³ Through each stage of the selection process, the geographical and linguistic diversity increased, as did the textual focus on non-normative social groups in terms of sexuality, age and class. This shows incontrovertibly that non-mainstream books do exist in every culture, and their place in the final selection demonstrates that they are of excellent quality. The results thus not only break down harmful assumptions that prop up unequal structures, but also directly address the issue of ‘discoverability’: if these books are not getting to publishers, an initiative such as PEN Presents offers a means to broker those connections. Intervening at this earlier stage in the chain of production also offers an opportunity to do more than passively reflect inequalities elsewhere, as prize long- and shortlists often do.

4. Conclusions: equal freedoms for all?

The research collaboration with English PEN, and the resultant funding of the open call issue of PEN Presents, offers a model of bridging academic research and the creative industries via an agent-based approach. It responds to the absence of brokers noted by Clarke, to the importance of opening up networks identified by all of the stakeholders interviewed during the research and development phase, and to the need to tackle fundamental rather than superficial manifestations of inequality highlighted by Bhanot and Dryden with regards to publishing in general, and by Glastonbury, Hur, and Patel and Youssef in the context of translated literature more specifically. Hur concludes that

if we want to change the way our translations are published, the way to do it is not only through individual action but through changing the entire landscape of publishing. [...] there are still so many ways to identify the cracks in the system that we can shove a wedge into or the points of leverage we can place a fulcrum upon, and it’s going to take all of these little efforts and opportunities combined into a movement to make changes that will truly benefit individuals. (Hur in Bhanot and Tiang 2022, p. 81)

However, there are two important considerations to put forward in this context. Firstly, and as demonstrated above, it is important that concerns about dismantling bias do not assume the conflation of colour and class, or of any other characteristics that prioritise certain authors and translators while

³² Though usually the shortlist will be comprised of twelve texts and the final selection of six, the quality of submissions was so high that an additional entry was selected for the second round, resulting in a shortlist of thirteen and a final volume of seven.

³³ These were a text from Cameroon, originally written in French, and one from Ecuador, originally written in Spanish.

marginalising others. Secondly, because of existing issues of unpaid labour and the barriers surrounding the commission of literature in translation, it is crucial that the work to effect these changes should not fall entirely to the translators. In this way, an initiative such as PEN Presents can be a useful model of allyship as outlined by Corine Tachtiris (2020), extending her arguments about translators as allies for marginalised authors (and specifically, in Tachtiris’s analysis, for authors of colour) to show how institutions can be allies for translators – and especially marginalised translators. By using the brand and reputation of English PEN as well as its market forces and global networks not only to endorse exciting new literature in translation but also to disseminate it, voices – of both authors and translators – that might not otherwise have access to the Anglophone market can benefit from increased visibility.

Activist initiatives such as the WPWiT and PEN Presents can serve as the ‘wedges’ for which Hur advocates, and so it is imperative that they fulfil their true diversity potential, changing rather than reproducing the systems in which they seek to intervene. This will further the goal of feminist translator studies to “remak[e] for the better” (Vassallo 2022, p. 150). This goal is based on Dryden’s proposals for a less biased publishing ecosystem, and resonates with both Bhanot’s suggestion that diversity initiatives could go much further and Glastonbury’s plea that publishers should be less conservative. The Eurocentric bias on the WPWiT shortlists reflects both the Eurocentric dominance of entries to the prize but also necessarily the tastes of the judging panel. PEN Presents has secured a more balanced representation and so it will be critical to monitor their progression from the PEN Presents platform through to commission and publication, and to analyse what gets commissioned and by whom.³⁴ Going forward, it will be important to ensure that PEN Presents is not only responding retroactively to the needs of a changing landscape, but is a fundamental part of that change: by prioritising a move away from geographical and intellectual centres and disrupting traditional models of commission and funding (see Smith 2018), the possibility emerges for a meaningful shift in the development of diversity initiatives. Because it is still only a new programme, its full impact is yet to unfold, but at this point it exemplifies Vassallo’s insistence on the importance of a “de-centring” approach in feminist translator studies, encompassing both “a shift away from mainstream narratives, urban writing, and default notions of gender, sexuality and race” and a concomitant shift away from “the inward-looking nature of

³⁴ At the time of writing, of 13 samples promoted through the first two issues, 6 have already been acquired by publishers, and another author has been agented. This acquisition rate for a samples initiative expressly focused on publishers acquiring more diverse literature is exceptionally high compared to industry equivalents, indicating the potentially vital role that PEN Presents could play in changing the landscape of literature in translation.

seeing ourselves reflected” (Vassallo 2022, pp. 152-153).³⁵ Conversely, the WPWiT – which, at the time of writing, is in its seventh year – has done important work in raising awareness of the gender imbalance in translated literature, but now might need to consider how to move on from that binary basic position, potentially by sub-dividing the prize by global region. It is particularly striking that the WPWiT-shortlisted translators interviewed understood ‘bibliodiversity’ primarily in terms of language, whereas for translators applying to PEN Presents, a broader definition is offered explicitly both to applicants and to the selection panel.³⁶ It is, then, possible that adding this as a judging criterion would not only lead to greater diversity on the long- and shortlists, but also raise awareness among publishers and translators of the importance of forms of bibliodiversity that go beyond gender and source language.

For the field to truly advance, it is our contention that researchers and stakeholders need to work together, focusing not only on the circulation of texts and the role of translators, but also on the people who allow that circulation to happen or prevent it from happening. As Forrester reminds us, “when we talk about systems change, we should remember that systems are comprised of and created by individuals” (Forrester in Schnee 2023). Though translators are vital activists and advocates for bibliodiversity, accounts from Glastonbury, Kaza, Hur, and Patel and Youssef (among others) point to the power relations implicit in literary translation. Networks can remain closed, and are not inherently positive just because they exist. Rather, we need to work to ensure that they are constantly expanding, broadening the landscape of translated literature in terms of authors and texts, but also by recognising that greater inclusivity and accessibility in the translation community are fundamental to greater diversity in translated literature.

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³⁵ See also Kaza (2022) and Tiang (2021). The final selection represents minority communities, illegal sexualities, middle-aged and “middling” characters, and comprises themes ranging from repression, censorship, and alternative communities to fable and the Covid-19 pandemic.

³⁶ In this context, bibliodiversity might encompass any or all of the following: a language, country, culture, form, theme, or genre underrepresented in UK publishing; new or previously elided perspectives on existing or already-represented themes, contexts or cultures; less-heard voices – from both authors and translators whose perspectives and identities are less-represented in UK publishing. See English PEN (2022).

(including works by Darina Al Joundi and Leïla Slimani), and is the founder of the industry-facing research project Translating Women, working against intersectional gender bias in the translated literature sector of the UK publishing industry.

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Acknowledgements: we would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the University of Exeter Open Innovation Platform for their financial support of the current research.

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Annexes

Language (in descending order of size of total entries)	Total no. of entries /587	Percentage of total entries by language	Total no. of titles per language on shortlist	Percentage of total no. of shortlisted titles /40
French	108	18.39	5	12.5
Spanish	63	10.71	2	5
German	58	9.88	7	17.5
Swedish	31	5.28	2	5
Italian	28	4.77	1	2.5
Japanese	28	4.77	1	2.5
Norwegian	25	4.25	-	-
Dutch	22	3.74	-	-
Korean	21	3.57	1	2.5
Danish	20	3.40	-	-
Arabic	18	3.06	1	2.5
Russian	17	2.89	3	7.5
Chinese	15	2.55	3	7.5
Icelandic	12	2.04	-	-
Catalan	11	1.87	1	2.5
Polish	10	1.7	6	15
Portuguese	9	1.53	-	-
Finnish	6	1.02	-	-
Croatian	5	0.85	1	2.5
Georgian	5	0.85	-	-
Hungarian	5	0.85	2	5
Latvian	5	0.85	-	-
Slovak	5	0.85	-	-
Hebrew	4	0.68	-	-
Slovenian	4	0.68	-	-
Turkish	4	0.68	-	-
Czech	3	0.51	-	-
Estonian	3	0.51	-	-
Farsi	3	0.51	1	2.5
Galician	3	0.51	-	-
Irish	3	0.51	1	2.5
Basque	2	0.34	-	-
Bengali	2	0.34	-	-
Flemish	2	0.34	-	-
Greek	2	0.34	1	2.5
Indonesian	2	0.34	-	-
Lithuanian	2	0.34	-	-
Romanian	2	0.34	-	-
Serbian	2	0.34	-	-
Tamil	2	0.34	-	-
Amharic	1	0.17	-	-
Armenian	1	0.17	-	-
Bangla	1	0.17	-	-
Belarussian	1	0.17	-	-
Bulgarian	1	0.17	-	-
Hindi	1	0.17	1	2.5
Kyrgyz	1	0.17	-	-
Macedonian	1	0.17	-	-
Maltese	1	0.17	-	-
Telugu	1	0.17	-	-
Thai	1	0.17	-	-

Tigrinya	1	0.17	-	-
Ukrainian	1	0.17	-	-
Urdu	1	0.17	-	-
Welsh	1	0.17	-	-
Total	587		40	

Table 1
WPWiT submissions and shortlists 2017-2023 by language.

Language grouping	As % of total entries	As % of shortlists
European	80.65	80
Non-European	19.22	20

Table 2
WPWiT submissions and shortlists 2017-2023 by language grouping.