

Translation, World Literature and the *locus standi* of Literature from the Indian Subcontinent

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“World Literature” traces its provenance to the ancient discipline of philology, somewhat contentiously, yoking together the most representative of literatures around the globe with rigorous study and evaluation claiming no precedence to any language or region, yet identifying with the necessity to translate, critically select and circulate the said texts for ‘literary evolution’.¹ Philology, associated later with German philosophers during the recent past few centuries, also spawned the discipline of comparative literature which must be understood at least in one basic contrast with world literature in that it presupposes a sound working knowledge of different languages as opposed to world literature which is literature translated in one language, English as a norm.² Aamir Mufti speaks of the “promise of a unified perspective on world culture” contained in the idea of world literature but one that has “a lingering sense of unease” accompanying the concept, with its “too easily achieved” resolutions and “easy commodification in the marketplace”.³ The recent resurgence of the idea of “world literature” springs largely from first-world groups of “literary historians” who “concede that the traditional pedagogical organization of the humanities according to national languages and literatures has exceeded its expiration date” and, therefore, the need for an ‘alternative model’ which has been long overdue, is the way forward.⁴ “Mobile demography, immigration, and the dispersion of reading publics” pushes towards a ‘postnationality’ which “can lead to blindness toward the economic and national power struggles that literary politics often front for, while potentially minimizing the conflict among the interests of monocultural states and multilingual communities.”⁵ The making of a finalizing argument ultimately takes the shape of a case for

empowerment on a global level via making the national international including the cultural and literary aspects with the addition of a caveat of medium of representation that requires a non-exact parallel in a monist literary world that undermines the very essence that it seeks to promote. While these statements could be read with certain reservations there is a ring of truth as to the effects of globalization are concerned be it in the fluid movement of the populace world across or the more specific global diversification in academia with social and economic reasons to boot. Literature, in the domain of knowledge, has its own tales of travels and travails across the globe for ages compounded more so with advancements in modes of production and distribution remaining all the while prone to the ebb and flow of spatial and temporal power systems. This call for “world literature” doing the rounds may sound contentious, earlier than its time and insidiously pursued in literary circles but it has been taking shape, circulating and is no new phenomenon in the literary world. For some, variously called classifications like “comparative literature”, “commonwealth literature” and “postcolonial literature” could be replaced with the unifying universalism of the overarching entity of “world literature” by virtue of the universal nature of literary texts/compositions.⁶ But it foregoes the claim of incorporation and continuation of diversity; rather, it betrays an invasive exercise in fashioning a monolithic entity of literature. This “universalism” against the regional flavour can be achieved at such a scale through translation only and that too in the lane with the most traffic. The paper argues that the idea of world literature with exclusive anthologies in English is more of an appropriation than universalization. Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Marquez, Pamuk and many more have been appropriated by the translation phenomenon as a unifying practice so much so that soon very few may actually be left to know their original medium of writing except their own country people. South Asia, the Indian subcontinent in particular, is a different case in point

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where people know of Perumal Murugan as the writer of *One Part Woman* and not *Madhurobhagan*. Translation in this sense is thus very much capable of obliterating the identity of writers in a linguistically diverse region like India. This unidirectional translational process espoused as the *modus operandi* for a unifying corpus endangers the rich linguistic and literary diversity of the region. One could take an opportunity to assess whether postnationality is a dominant player in the formation of world literature and a crucial pointer that makes it necessary to constantly return to a miscellaneous yet monolithic body of literary texts; this could be extended to Indian context to understand the nature of literary consumption that could make the postnational possible in the postcolony and a resurgent nationalism.

The idea of world literature has been loaded since its conception. When Goethe exultantly declares “I nevertheless would personally like to make my friends aware that I am convinced a universal world literature is in the process of being constituted, in which an honourable role is reserved for us Germans,”⁷ there is without any characteristic subtlety a setting apart of some entities, the reflection on the literary and aesthetic privilege of German literature at the time, for instance, which has been at the core of any such call for world literature, that of giving exclusive precedence to a certain languages and literatures. In another place Goethe is less restraint when he says “while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to some particular thing, and regard it as a model. We must not give this value to the Chinese, or the Serbian ... we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented. All the rest we must look at only historically; appropriating to ourselves what is good,”⁸ Tracing origins with the ritual homage to the Greek poets; it does not take much deliberation to come across the unabashed avowal of dominance through appropriation. Given the fact that German soldiers at the concentration camps during World War II were given Goethe, among other literatures to read, who wrote at one place, “The phenomenon which I call world literature will come about mainly when the disputes within one nation are settled by the opinions and judgments of others”⁹, it is a wonder world literature still finds polarized apologists despite such dubious a provenance. World Literature may seem a very innocuous and benign idea, going by what its proponents claim and avow, in seeking a unity of expression, universality among different literatures but it does bring a lot of violence in its wake in its preponderance to define the ‘world’ in world literature, to contain the ‘world’ of world literature, what should be the language of world literature. The academic propaganda is itself vocal in the medium of this debate which is English as

of now passionately pursued in the academic circles across the Atlantic and which very well could have been German, although Goethe pursued a different line of thought in that that he saw German literature with ease of communication getting a new lease of life and being “reborn in translation”¹⁰ for he saw fulfilled in translation what he found lacking in German literature.

Speaking of what could be the language of world literature, it goes without saying that it has to be English. The world literature now being talked about is more or less arguing not for giving away works that are considered one’s own but for appropriating others. English as a “global vernacular” possesses the vantage point for that transaction. With there being no doubt in English being the global language in many ways, the world literature that is being called toward for, can hardly be imagined as any other but English which is deemed as the principal centre for any like enterprise. Hence, the “translation” and the “border crossing” is a one-way traffic –a crossing over to the Anglican Church of literature, a migration, a conversion. Marquez, Kundera, Brecht and Strindberg are clubbed together under Continental literature although they write across different cultures and languages and address diverse themes. Other categories like Commonwealth literature also restrict and truncate understanding and lead to standardizations like world literature. World literature surfaces as just another way of relegating the already marginal, of denying the deserved representation and appropriating that which cannot be ignored. To find Franco Moretti suggesting, “Reading ‘more’ is always a good thing, but not the solution”¹¹, it becomes difficult to escape what is subtly being proposed –a model of inclusion and exclusion, appropriation as an eventuality. During a direct colonial dominance, it used to be outright dismissal in far out quips like a “single shelf” of a good European library contains the essence and wisdom of “the whole native literature of India and Arabia”.¹² The swaying dominance of English as language globally gives little space to the said authors in the language they wrote in other than in their own countries. Readers, unassuming and uninformed do not immediately come to know that *War and Peace* is not originally in English until well after sometime or what its title reads in original. Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Kafka, Pamuk and Marquez with every other author we admire and have read or recommend to people, are very well appropriated by English. Knowing at least the original titles of their works may do a world of good. A misconstrued view that being acquainted with a translated piece spurs on towards learning the language of the original and the cultural baggage the language carries, although not altogether misplaced, is thin on the ground and the deliberate unmindfulness of a commerce-oriented

literary project obsessed with a culture of dominance referred to far outdoes the later interest which if at all germinates, most of it is individual, amateur and transient zeal. While it may be contended that one cannot go on learning new languages and the translations do a good job in connecting those works with a global audience, one should also ponder at the events that have conditioned such a situation and where it could further lead us to, and why the global readership is by default an English knowing one? Yet again, it may be said that translations of these literary pieces are done in more languages than one but even readers (of the present age) who know the language of the original, go for the translation. When we read about authors and their famous works we find them translated into a number of languages but the matter of concern is the obscurity of such translations lacking any proper record of the same. The original starts to fade in existence in the public sphere which is the fear shared by many, that the institutional structure of world literature will consign to oblivion whole oeuvres leaving nothing to fall back to. When some text is translated from our languages to English, we do make it a point to go through its translation. But is the converse true? Readers, university professors and writers even are creating a fixed point of reference. Formal, scholarly gravity is often accorded to the English text or version taking away the sanctity of and the deserved engagement with the native languages. While the claim that translation has preserved a copious amount of our literature that could have faded into oblivion cannot be vehemently denied yet more pronounced and profound stands the flipside that poses before it the dangers of obliteration hastening the gradual demise of its readership in original; what translation does here is to flatten the variegated layers of identities and cultures and projects a frozen image of the original literature, language and culture.

Moretti allows himself to state that the study of world literature is –inevitably –a study of the symbolic hegemony across the world. He says, “There is no other justification for the study of world literature but this: to be a thorn in the side, a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures –especially the local literature.”¹³ The seamless incorporation of the local experience in the ambit of world literature is far from any material reality, a distant dream at best given the phenomenon of economic globalization. Moretti gives two models of structuring literature: as a tree that branches further for regional literature and as a wave assimilating all in one for world literature. This metaphor of wave as an overwhelming entity can be understood by a historical reference. Aamir Mufti in his book *Forget English* argues that more than a century ago there were “many distinct cultures of poetic composition even in the same town or city, based

in a variety of languages and dialects” and these Indian “languages and cultures had ... undergone dramatic change under the violent impact of foreign rule”.¹⁴ As the whole land was wielded into a homogenized entity, so were these traditions of literary compositions starting off with the re-education of the masses, missionary training, imposition of English and institutions like Fort William College.

It hardly seems misplaced to say that there is a missionary zeal in this process and it does violence to the world of expressions. Dialectical tunings like “bakne bhi do aajiz ko jo boley hai, bakey hai, diwana hai diwane se kya baat karo ho”, lose their topological and temporal function and emphasis altogether. ‘Bolta hai’ and ‘bakta hai’ can be dealt with in translation but in the case of ‘boley hai, bakey hai’ and ‘baat karo ho’, which are there as the poet’s essential markers and one of the composition cultures in a particular region and language, what follow are non-judicious translations and reductive footnotes. It could be studied as one of those things that Aamir Mufti is hinting at. Reduplicative structures and expressions like ‘chalte chalte’, ‘dheere dheere’, in which the languages of the Sino-Burman and Tibeto-Burman family are especially rich in, are likely to be lost along with their associations with the identity of those people and how they conduct themselves.¹⁵ These reduplications are amongst the cultures of composition that are endangered along with the languages of those structures and expressions.¹⁶ While taking into consideration world literature and the specificity of relations engendered within it and other literatures that are subcategories having, in turn, secondary and tertiary categories, there arises the need to look what it could do to those who do not play a defining role in it as also who defines and allocates these roles.

In anthologies of world literature, South Asian literature has a visceral representation and as we go further east towards Malaysia, Thailand, etc. the situation worsens. A look at the contents of the Norton Anthology of World Literature will tell the story. World Literature, thus, emerges as another colonial structure of dominance on the intellectual and creative plane. There is no denying the fact that the literature we are talking about, and the kind of debate and discourse it entails, is specified to serve some targeted stratum of people. The case of the Norton Anthology of World Literature can be a strong case in point as to who reads it, who are the people who recommend it, who buys and can buy, who designs it, whose authority it submits to? There is, no doubt, a precedence allocated to English. Vinay Dharwadker, one of the editors, had to implore the other editors, as he himself admits, for each entry from the Indian subcontinent. He had to hold fast his ground for the inclusion of Kalidasa, Premchand,

Manto, Ghalib, Mahashweta Devi, faced a gruelling task and yet failed to persuade them to include more.¹⁷ The anthology is prescribed by most American Universities and has a wide circulation among the general American public as well. The questions of affordability, readership, institutional authority, what world and whose world impinge yet again.¹⁸ The issue of identity (postcolonial, postnational and cosmopolitan) has led to the making of what may be called a body of non-resident, Indian-origin and diaspora translators who find more than ever the necessity to translate, ironically, inevitable and we have therefore translations coming from Indians based in the US, the UK and other English-speaking countries trying to bring our literature to a global stage for a reading public that shares the same identities although not exclusively.¹⁹

But ours is “the world made by capitalist globalisation” and Goethe is seen in contemporary capitalist context to be blissfully unaware of the “power relations” within the world that takes shape with literary productions.²⁰ The idea of authors not getting translated to or from regional languages is invariably not a fully formed one that can hardly be backed with credible evidence, yet, so far as the consumption, dissemination and discussion around those translations are concerned, the dozens of languages lined up in details of a text’s translations and awards could barely constitute a face and could at best be euphemised as obscure. Within this inevitable paradigm, it is the status of consumption that trumps over that of production and literature has an additional pressure to be viable in the global market.²¹ Professor Surjit Hans, who retired in 1993 from Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, translated all of Shakespeare’s plays into Punjabi. It was a 20 years’ project and after 2013 there is not much to be heard what happened of all that, who is reading them, where are they prescribed. And in terms of remuneration, he made a paltry 8000 rupees per play at two plays a year²²; it comes out as a *cul de sac*, the way ends in a blind alley with little to offer besides the fulfilment of a cherished passion. It should not be understood, therefore, that we are not translating from English. An important fact to note and think about is that Robinson Crusoe which is regarded by many as the forerunner of the modern novel, was translated into Bengali as early as 1852 by the Vernacular Literature Society but whether it was a case of self-implosion or manufactured bankruptcy or too much to expect from the forces of world domination to let these incipient institutions thrive much less prevail, is left to surmises. That is why I hold some reservations regarding literary translation as a democratic exercise although its role as a window to the world cannot be but acknowledged. William Jones contributed much to the cause having formed the Asiatic Society in 1784. The contribution of Fort William College

cannot be ignored or undermined; Meer Amman’s *Bagh-o-bahaar* and Lallujilal’s *Premsaagar* are some examples.²³ However, it must be kept in mind that the translations done there pledged much to the whims and fancies of the colonial masters and select texts and often parts of texts were chosen to be translated and fed into the system of knowledge. Fort William College contributed its fair share in reinforcing colonial stereotypes by foregrounding what was chosen for translation and they had preceded Macaulay’s Minutes of 1835. A nativist perspective would have a critical take on the passionate diachronic arguments in favour of Fort William College appearing to forget the surreptitious collusion of such an approach with the Eurocentric or more specifically Anglocentric project of colonizing knowledge and knowledge production and dissemination. A more judicious view would grant that it was not an unprecedented phenomenon rather very much in keeping with what goes on in the intellectual, academic and literary realm in a period of ascendancy. In retrospect one could not in a general sweep cry foul at one and brush off the many translations and other literary and historical projects undertaken during the reign of kings and emperors, not few in count. Throughout Indian history many works were commissioned and experts of language, literature, history and theology employed the then court language or languages used to be the central pivot later placed in the list called Oriental languages. English preponderance comes as a direct result of British imperialism the world over and the increasing and continuing sway of English across the globe.

Literatures are created and function in different modalities, at different planes. Until and unless the programmers of “world literature” are able to fully acknowledge such categorization into consideration, their own episteme as regards what should be world literature will dominate other worldviews and even for those who write in English elsewhere, the North Star of “We cannot write like the English. We should not” that Raja Rao argues for in the Foreword of *Kanthapura* cannot buy them a respectable place therein. The domination of Western theories is bound to hegemonize the configuration of world literature as well. The emulation of Western standards fervently argued for in “translation and publication” including “form and content”²⁴ and to make works seem as if originally written in English²⁵ reflects strongly on the easy commodification referred to by Aamir Mufti²⁶ and could be the precursor to diminishing competence in native languages and making quite a few aspects of our languages redundant if not languages themselves.²⁷

There is a need that we evolve our own theories of interpretations and discourses, our own modes of criticism. By our, the thrust is South Asian, for we have

in our literatures pronounced depths of historicity, multiplicities of identities, diverse cultural configuration, various contextual indicators and binaries, different modalities of gender and even the creative impulses of writers are varied.²⁸ Thinking of a writer who is writing in a language he knows will not bring him viable royalties, one is forced to grant that literary writers, the real passionate ones, at least most of them, are not writing in English. We should translate more from other world languages which may yet save many diverse aspects of our languages the same way one-way translation may render them redundant if not the languages themselves. It is also high time we assess and evaluate the translations already done and try to fill in the gaps that come with the cultural baggage and misinterpretations. Translating back can be very resourceful in this regard. We are fast losing competence in our own languages. As translators in a modern setting, taking our own case, we are more comfortable in translating from Hindi/Urdu into English than rendering something in what we call our mother tongues. We need to keep a close sit-in with our languages, dialects, inflections, amalgams and translate within our languages with the same zeal. The European and trans-Atlantic nations have been and are doing it.²⁹ It should not be without the disclaimer that going for promotion of the indigenous and translations within native linguistic tradition cannot be without a centre too and can hardly be pursued with disinterest and is a topic of perennial debate. Editing an anthology of world literature incorporating substantial works from Indian languages would not mean much as to the guarantee of marketability and commercial survival of the same but may do something to remedy our hurt pride in our literary traditions. To make it meaningful to hold would need to begin with the shaping of syllabi and move towards making our languages gain influence in the socio-economic structures and apparatus. This some would contend, may lead to blind nationalistic fervour and denial of global scene of multi-national, multicultural interdependence; that, it may be contended, depends on how we approach the formulation of policies and legislations regarding the same. It does not necessarily entail aggressive commercialization of nativism seen as an exclusivist exercise. Nonetheless, the question of acceptability and marketability will continue to haunt the regional for some time and a self-contained exercise in freedom will take its course as has the shaking of colonial yoke. India being the wishful and wistful east in world literature anthologies will itself have its easts once a world literature anthology of localised focus come to shelves which will create a cycle more of such task and enterprise. It also gives a moment to ponder of the readily available knowledge and how it is being more and more

created, reproduced, recycled and disseminated with the passage of time and advancements in various media.

As such, what is offered becomes more of a regulatory model of the 'Greenwich meridian' which is English and a country like India cannot get more in that map of 'world literature'. While translation as a window to the world cannot be treated with outright rejection, there remains a need to 'not forget' what is our own and to recover what is 'lost' by translating in our own languages. The argument stands thus that translation into English should not be taken as the only mode to 'get across' rather taken along should be the promotion of native languages and literatures through an impetus to translation from English. Translations from one Indian language to another need proper incentives and encouragement. My argument is not against translation of literary texts into English as such but the insidious concerted effort to global intellectual and creative hegemony masked as world literature. The standardization sought in this concept as argued by Erich Auerbach is that if humanity could "succeed in withstanding the shock of so mighty and rapid a process of concentration ... then man will have to accustom himself to existence in a standardized world, to a single literary culture and only a few literary languages, and perhaps even a single literary language" and "herewith the notion of *weltliteratur* would be at once realized and destroyed."³⁰ The inherent apprehensions here are fast unfolding as reality as the world moves forward with the standardizations and global seamless movements of material, cultural and intellectual commodities. The paradox of a unifying standard that renders what it takes non-existent may be the landscape looming on the horizon. Unless a redeeming inclusive framework is arrived at world literature will continue being the 'thorn' pricking the already precarious corpus of regional literatures. The standard workings of British imperialist project that "crafted" in Fort William College a surreptitious space for "cultural hegemony" with the façade of a "knowledge imparter"³¹ could mutate in the formulations of world literature into a watery grave for the local, regional, folk, oral and indigenous swept away in the deluge and translation in the Indian context would at best remain a necessary crime that one has to commit.

Notes

1. Wang, Ning. "Cosmopolitanism and the Internationalization of Chinese Literature." *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller*, edited by Angelica Duran and Yuhua Huang, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, Indiana, 2014, pp. 167–182. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wq1tk.16. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.
2. Pheng Cheah. *World against Globe: Toward a Normative*

- Conception of World Literature New Literary History, Volume 45, Number 3, Summer 2014, pp. 303-329
3. Mufti, Aamir. *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*. Harvard University Press. 2016.
 4. Apter, Emily. "Untranslatables: A World System." *New Literary History*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2008, pp. 581–598. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20533103. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Damrosch, David. *What Is World Literature*. Princeton University Press. 2003.
 7. *Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe's Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. Pp-228.
 8. Taken from *Conversations of Goethe* by Johannes Peter Eckermann. Translated by John Oxenford. Digital production by <http://www.hxa7241.org/> 2010.
 9. In *Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. John Gearey. Goethe's Collected Works, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 228
 10. Goethe opined this in a letter to Carlyle dated 15 June, 1828. Quoted in Strich, Fritz. *Goethe and World Literature* translated by C A M Sym. Routledge and K. Paul. 1949: 22.
 11. Moretti, Franco. *Conjectures on World Literature*, *New Left Review*; Jan 1, 2000. pp-55
 12. From Macaulay's Minute on Education, February 2, 1835.
 13. Moretti, Franco. *Conjectures on World Literature*, *New Left Review*; Jan 1, 2000. pp-68.
 14. Mufti, Aamir. *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*. Harvard University Press. 2016.
 15. Abbi, Anvita. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, No.2, September 1990. Reduplication in Tibeto Burman Languages of South Asia. pp. 171-181.
 16. Abbi, Anvita. "Reduplicative Structures: A Phenomenon of the South Asian Linguistic Area." *Oceanic Linguistics Special Publications*, no. 20, 1985, pp. 159–171. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20006719. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.
 17. From a Plenary Talk delivered by Vinay Dharwadker at a 3 day conference on "Indian Literature as World Literature: Past, Present and Future" at EFL University, Hyderabad. India. 18-20 February 2018.
 18. The same academic group conducted a survey across its audience to decide for inclusion and exclusion of authors: the urban, adult, white and perhaps male. And the most essential and relevant writer to come up was Machiavelli, far ahead of Tolstoy or Shakespeare, Dante or Homer.
 19. Dharwadker, Vinay. "Translating the Millennium: Indian Literature in the Global Market." *Indian Literature*, vol. 52, no. 4 (246), 2008, pp. 133–146. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23347959. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.
 20. Pheng Cheah. What Is a World? On World Literature as World-Making Activity. *Daedalus*, Vol. 137, No. 3, On Cosmopolitanism (Summer, 2008), pp. 26-38.
 21. Trivedi, Harish. "Translation and World Literature: the Indian Context," in *Translation and World Literature*, ed. Susan Bassnett. London: Routledge, 2019, pp. 15-28.
 22. Covered in *The Hindu* as "Read As You Like It". 11 March, 2013.
 23. Tariq Rahman. *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three* (pp.1-2) Chapter: Fort William College. Publisher: Brill. Editors: Kate Fleet et. al 2013
 24. Dharwadker, Vinay. "Translating the Millennium: Indian Literature in the Global Market." *Indian Literature*, vol. 52, no. 4 (246), 2008, pp. 133–146. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23347959. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.
 25. Ibid
 26. It is also a bitter-sweet reminder of our accorded place on the literary scene and our inadequately funded literary bodies that are poorly marketed and publicised and compared to international standards, doled out meagre aids to carry out what seems self-defeating goals. The National Translation Mission, Sahitya Akademi are well-respected bodies that cater to an elite clutch within the academia, their publications adorning library-stacks with the largely unaware majority within the student and teaching community.
 27. Mufti, Aamir. *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*. Harvard University Press. 2016.
 28. Ansari, Ameena Kazi. *Indian Literature*, vol. 52, no. 3 (245), 2008, pp. 227–230. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23340548. Accessed 4 July 2020.
 29. There is an entire Directorate General for Translation in the European Union dedicated to the more than 20 official languages of the European Union. The Czech Republic a few years back has commissioned a library of representative texts from all over the world to be translated into Czech.
 30. Erich Auerbach, et al. "Philology and 'Weltliteratur.'" *The Centennial Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1969, pp. 1–17. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23738133. Accessed 5 Oct. 2020.
 31. Dutta, Sutapa. "Fort William, Calcutta: Fortifying an Imperial Space" in *Summerhill: Vol 25 No 1* (2019). pp. 24-29.