



Anne Frank Abroad

The Emergence of World Atrocity Literature

Katherine Wilson

"If she was going to be thought exceptional, it would not be because of Auschwitz and Belsen but because of what she had made of herself since." – Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*

Known to the English-speaking world by its translation, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, Anne Frank's diary marks what many regard as the seminal example of testimonial literature. Today, the international fame of the diary is well known; the number of its translations now reaches over sixty. Taking a long journey from its original Dutch, translations of the *Diary* reach globally into languages such as Farsi, Sinhalese, and Esperanto. Yet little has been documented about its afterlife in these numerous

non-European languages. Despite the *Diary's* wide circulation, most examinations only focus on the text's proliferation throughout Europe and North America. Here, I would like to trace the *Diary's* circulation outside the West, examining the text's influence in places like North Korea, Cambodia, Bosnia, Palestine, and Algeria. Looking at the ways a familiar text is interpreted in less-familiar settings not only tells us about the transnational circulation of atrocity testimonies but also tells us something about the way world literature works.

When we examine the *Diary's* foreign translations, we might be surprised to discover unexpected and, at times, disconcerting interpretations of the *Diary* emerging from areas such as North Korea, Palestine, and Cambodia. The “Anne Frank Translation Project” in Cambodia, for example, has proven to be an important teaching tool used to combat the widespread public belief that mass atrocity is unique to Cambodia. “Genocide did not only happen in Cambodia,” cites the *Diary's* Khmer translator, Sayana Ser, in an interview for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s podcast, *Voices on Antisemitism*. Ser’s mission is to offer Cambodians a way to make sense of the Khmer Rouge genocide within the broader framework of the world history of atrocity: “I think if [Cambodians] know that genocide has happened in other places, they would not feel like they are the only ones that suffered.”

So far, so good—right? You might be more scandalized to learn how the *Diary* is officially used in North Korea. In 2004 a Dutch film crew gained rare access to cover the *Diary's* adoption as a required text in all secondary schools in the nation. They revealed firsthand that the *Diary* was being used as an allegory to paint then-President George W. Bush as Hitler and the North Koreans as the Jews. As one North Korean student explained in an interview, “According to our respected leader, Kim Jong Il, *The Diary of Anne Frank* is one of the great classics of the world. That is why we read the diary—out of great respect for our leader.” When questioned about what they had learned from reading the *Diary*, one student stated, “That warmonger Bush is just as bad as Hitler. Because of him we will always live in fear of war.” Another student declared, “For world peace, America will have to be destroyed. Only then will Anne’s dream of peace come true.”

The negotiation between the host culture and source culture of a work is complicated—much can arguably be lost in translation. In *What Is World Literature?*, David Damrosch sees this as a natural attribute of world literature: “The receiving culture can use the foreign material in all sorts of ways: as a positive model for the future development of its own tradition; as a negative case of a primitive, or decadent, strand that must be avoided or rooted out at

home; or, more neutrally, as an image of radical otherness against which the home tradition can more clearly be defined.” Damrosch concludes that world literature is “always as much about the host culture’s values and needs as it is about the work’s source culture.” We may believe that the *Diary's* circulation will advance an accurate education about the Holocaust—a value held by most Western readers. This logic assumes that the text’s “real message” remains stable as it travels across cultural, temporal, and linguistic boundaries. But, as the above examples show, other cultures may form drastically different interpretations of Frank’s *Diary*, some of which we may stridently oppose. What the reception of Frank’s text in Cambodia and North Korea suggests is that the way in which an account travels primarily indicates the text’s *usefulness* in the contexts in which it’s received.

Anne, My Sister/Lover/Mother

The *Diary of Anne Frank* not only travels into more than sixty different languages, it also finds itself imported into multiple works of fiction. There are, in fact, a number of novels in which the protagonist reads the *Diary*. These works demonstrate a separate mode of world literature circulation, where the *Diary* circulates intratextually. Looking across these narratives, we see the reader’s experience with the *Diary* from an array of historical and cultural contexts. For each fictional character, his or her reading of the *Diary* from a different cultural context produces a unique encounter with the text. Here I would like to focus on the reading and reception of Frank’s work in two novels taking place outside the West: Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* (1984) and Waciny Laredj’s *Shurufat Bahr al-Shamal* (2003; Fr. *Les Balcons de la Mer du Nord*).

For the main character of Cliff’s *Abeng*, a racially mixed Jamaican girl named Clare Savage, the *Diary* serves as a personal guidebook through which Clare comes to understand both her physical maturation into womanhood and her place in a society coping with a legacy of colonial oppression by the British. The novel traces Clare’s interaction with the *Diary*, beginning with her purchase of the paperback version. Later, she cuts school because she “needed to see this movie *The Diary of Anne Frank*.” The twelve-

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year-old's similarities with Frank become the catalyst for the protagonist's deep identification, a connection which Cliff foregrounds throughout the novel: "It was hard for Clare to imagine someone, another girl, who was of her age or near to her age, dying—to imagine her dying as Anne Frank died, in a place called Bergen-Belsen, the year before Clare was born, was impossible." From these initial insights, the *Diary* becomes the key through which Clare struggles to come to terms with the history of racial discrimination in Jamaica. At one point, Clare reasons to herself, "Just as Jews were expected to suffer in a Christian world, so were dark people expected to suffer in a white one."

In her mentorship of Clare, Anne Frank also serves as a feminine role model, teaching Clare how to negotiate her strained relationship with her mother and the onset of her menstruation. In fact, the narration of Clare's psychological and physical developments have close parallels to those entries in Frank's diary. For instance, in her January 1944 entry, Frank recalls her private explorations of her body and the experience of sleeping with a girlfriend: "I had a strong desire to kiss her, and . . . I did do so." Similar passages appear in *Abeng*, where Clare relates her feelings toward her friend Zoe. At one point, Clare finds herself lying naked next to Zoe after the two girls go skinny-dipping in a river. Unlike Anne, Clare represses her desire to "lean across Zoe's breasts and kiss her." In the end, the *Diary* serves as a narrative framework on which Clare maps her private and public experiences growing up in Jamaica.

Another work that demonstrates the *Diary's* intratextual circulation is a 2002 Algerian novel entitled *Shurufat Bahr al-Shimal* (Balconies of the North Sea), by Waciny Laredj. Yet to be translated from its original Arabic into English, the work remains virtually unknown to Western readers. The narrative begins as Yassine, an Algerian Muslim exile, flees from his native Algeria to northern Europe. The *Diary* appears when Yassine recalls the comfort he felt reading the *Diary* while in hiding during the Algerian civil war. Finding his way to Amsterdam, Yassine learns from his hotel's concierge that he stands

only a short distance from the Frank family's hiding place. The news propels him into a reverie from which we discover the *Diary's* significance in Yassine's life: "*The Diary of Anne Frank* filled my solitude during those dark years. We are so alike in fear! Sometimes we learn more from the simple books of children than from big academic lectures. Anne Frank had transformed my view of life, to perceive it with an increased sensitivity and to consider it as something that was worth the price." Yassine's exile, we learn, is in protest of the Algerian government's granting of amnesty to a large swath of prisoners at the close of the Algerian civil war. Leading up to this breaking point, Yassine had been forced into hiding during the most intense periods of the war. Recalling his reading and rereading of the *Diary* during "those dark years," Yassine directly references his own traumatic experience of war through his close identification with Frank's account. During his visit to the Annex, Yassine confesses, "Every time I began to feel lost, I opened Anne Frank's diary like a lover reading the first love letter from the woman that he had silently loved all his life" (translations my own).

Yassine's obsession with the *Diary* is eventually personified as he meets and falls in love with Anne Frank herself. We find the figure of Frank not only very much alive but also eroticized. As he walks through the historic corridors of the Frank family's hiding place, Yassine suddenly glimpses the childish silhouette of Anne crossing the hall. Following her into a bedroom, Yassine sits next to her on a bed, comforting a frightened figure of Anne who still believes she is hiding from the enemy. Attempting to create a safe and intimate environment, Yassine's mood is ultimately ambivalent, caught between comforting a scared little girl and embracing the woman of his fantasies. While holding her, he thinks, "Things had not changed a lot; it was the same voice, the same confusions, the same shivers, the same panting silence, the same groans of agony begging in vain for a little saliva to be swallowed." Yassine's repeated descriptions of Anne as "shivering," "panting," and "groaning" take on an erotic tone. When Anne whispers into his ear, Yassine "feels the shiver of her panting

voice in its childish inflection.” He goes on to remark, “She was looking for something else to connect her to life.” Although never explicit in the text, Yassine’s desire is implied and Anne becomes the figure through which Yassine both works through the trauma of war and channels his sexual energy.

Clare and Yassine, as fictional readers, demonstrate how reactions to a single testimony can traverse the emotional spectrum given the reader’s rhetorical-cultural context. These novels call our attention to the ways testimonial narratives are received, demonstrating the ease with which readers—often unconsciously—transform historic individuals into symbols for personal transformation.

The Anne Frank Phenomenon

To observe the third and final mode of the *Diary’s* circulation requires that we move from the fictional world back into the real world, where a number of foreign “Anne Franks” have arisen in the past two decades. These various “Annes” are female authors whose accounts of atrocity are marketed under the name of Anne Frank. Tracking this international phenomenon through numerous countries, I’ve found references to the “Anne Frank” of Cambodia, Palestine, Russia, France, Taiwan, Albania, Bosnia, Vietnam, and Iraq. In several cases, multiple Anne Franks have appeared from a single country. For some, the emergence of these Anne Franks is a point of national pride. “I have seen many Anne Franks in Cambodia,” boasted Youk Chhang regarding the *Diary’s* translation into Khmer. Indeed, there are three marketed “Anne Franks” who wrote testimonies of the Cambodian genocide. Others view the Anne Frank phenomenon as deeply disturbing. In his discovery of numerous “Palestinian Anne Franks,” Alvin Rosenfeld condemned the writers for taking advantage of the name recognition to publish their own diaries detailing their fight against “Israeli Hitlers.”

In many cases, publishers intentionally parallel an individual’s account with Frank’s *Diary*.

In 2008 Loung Ung’s memoir, *First They Killed My Father* (2000), and the Khmer translation of Frank’s *Diary* were orchestrated for simultaneous release in Cambodia. Following the release, Ung gained the title of the “Anne Frank of Pol Pot’s killing fields,” and her account has been called “The Diary of Anne Frank of Cambodia.” Reviewing Ung’s book in *Library Journal*, John Riddick proclaims, “In this ‘Age of Holocaust,’ Ung’s memoir of her childhood in Pol Pot’s Cambodia offers a haunting parallel to the writings of Anne Frank in the Europe of Adolf Hitler.” And yet authors who are marketed as Anne Frank are often put into a challenging position. For instance, in Elizabeth Lyon’s how-to book, *Nonfiction Book Proposals Anyone Can Write* (2000), Lyon reproduces a letter written by Cambodian author Chanrithy Him to literary agent Meredith Bernstein. Him’s letter asked for assistance in selling her memoir of the Khmer Rouge genocide. Used by Lyon as an example of good marketing strategies for querying agents and editors, Him’s letter nonetheless expresses the author’s ambivalence at being characterized as Anne Frank: “When I spoke at a 1991 conference at Portland State University,” Him recounts, “I was introduced to the audience, made up of educators and counselors, as ‘the Cambodian Anne Frank.’ While there are similarities in our stories, there are also differences, not the least of which is that the Cambodian holocaust is still underreported.” Distancing herself from the label of Anne Frank, Him distinguishes her experience and what she terms the Cambodian holocaust from Frank’s narrative. Yet the inclusion of Anne Frank in Him’s letter to Bernstein ultimately works to authorize Him’s credentials as a writer of atrocity literature. Rather than critique Him’s identification with Anne Frank, Lyon declares this adopted persona to be “a terrific selling handle.” Based on the fact that Bernstein did eventually represent Him in publishing her memoir with W. W. Norton as *When Broken Glass Floats* (2001), Lyon is right.

Today, the “Anne Franks” whose experiences are most often compared with Frank’s are young authors who write during wartime. Zlata

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If the global circulation of testimony now signals the emergence of a particular subset—or unsightly underbelly—of world literature, how might identifying a “world literature of atrocity” change the way we encounter these works? And what insights can be gained about world literature itself by tracing the circulation of atrocity accounts?

Filipović’s text, published in 1995 as *Zlata’s Diary*, includes her reaction to being identified by her teachers and peers as the Anne Frank of Sarajevo. Early passages recall her initial attachment to the identification: “Since Anne Frank called her diary Kitty . . . I’m going to call you MIMMY. All right, then, let’s start” (March 30, 1992). Just a year and a half later, however, Filipović’s writing noticeably shifts away from earlier positive associations with Frank. On August 2, 1993, Filipović writes, “Some people compare me with Anne Frank. That frightens me, Mimmy. I don’t want to suffer her fate.” Two months later, we see the figure of Anne Frank ultimately haunt Filipović: “I have to try to get through all this, with your support, Mimmy, and to hope that it will pass and that I will not suffer the fate of Anne Frank.” Whereas Anne’s diary, “Kitty,” can be safely mimicked by Filipović’s “Mimmy,” for Filipović to identify with Frank beyond the text of her *Diary* means experiencing a suffering and death similar to Frank’s.

This raises the question about the possibility of a *Diary* like Anne Frank’s being written today. The irony is that, despite the unlikelihood of the *Diary* being produced in a technological age, these later writers are nonetheless pressured to write in a certain way in order to fulfill their audience’s expectation of reading a text similar to Anne Frank’s. In terms of genre, Anne Frank did not know she was writing Holocaust literature. Zlata, however, must labor under the consciousness that she is writing “like Anne Frank.” If narratives of atrocity now regularly interface, we might consider the extent to which the circulation of narratives like the *Diary* regulates the depiction of other atrocities.

What Is World (Atrocity) Literature?

Today, accounts testifying to human rights abuses and genocide rapidly intertwine with a number of reading communities and other works of testimony. In fact, the cultural reach of testimonial narratives has become so extensive that firsthand witnesses to atrocity often write their experiences through and against their previous knowledge of iconic accounts. The Cambodian filmmaker *Socheata Poev* disclosed, before making her documentary *New Year Baby* on the Cambodian genocide, that she “knew more about

the Holocaust than the Khmer Rouge.” What is certain is that such cross-exposure of atrocity accounts is only becoming more prevalent. As both a writer and reader of testimonial narratives, Poev represents a generation of artists who occupy a position unique to most of their literary predecessors. Their texts reveal an intimate awareness that their experiences correspond to a global pattern. Unavoidably, their testimonies represent works of comparative genocide.

If the global circulation of testimony now signals the emergence of a particular subset—or unsightly underbelly—of world literature, how might identifying a “world literature of atrocity” change the way we encounter these works? And what insights can be gained about world literature itself by tracing the circulation of atrocity accounts? Amid the extensive scholarship on world literature, I find David Damrosch’s definition a good starting place. Categorizing a text as world literature, according to Damrosch, doesn’t necessarily indicate some inherent quality in the work itself but rather highlights the characteristics of its movement, specifically as it travels beyond its culture of origin. With this reframing, Damrosch describes world literature as a “mode of circulation and of reading.” Since atrocity is, arguably, a worldwide phenomenon, any responsible study of this literature must take its global scope into account. Expanding on Damrosch’s modal understanding of world literature, we see that the textual circulation of atrocity testimonies like the *Diary* is inherently *multimodal* in its global circulation—it takes many forms. If we look at the *Diary*’s circulation, what we actually see are (at least) three separate modes of transnational reception: first, as a translation affecting the way non-Western communities represent their experiences of genocide; second, as a text read by the protagonists of novels; and third, as an authorizing force resulting in the rise of multiple foreign “Anne Franks.” Compared with direct translation, each of these less direct modes represents a progressively more abstract relationship to the original.

Tracing the multiple modes through which a single atrocity narrative travels on a global scale allows us to observe the differences in reception and interpretation based on the readers’ cultural context. Within the broader framework of world literature, what can understanding these various

modes of travel tell us about atrocity literature? For Pascale Casanova, world literature functions in the “world republic of letters,” a politically charged space in which texts fight for recognition in a global arena. Distinct from traditional notions of geopolitical space, the world republic of letters has “its own economy, which produces hierarchies and various forms of violence; and, above all, its own history . . . Its geography is based on the opposition between a capital, on the one hand, and peripheral dependencies whose relationship to this center is defined by their aesthetic distance from it.” If atrocity testimonies now represent a growing body of texts in the world republic of letters, Anne Frank’s *Diary* represents the literary equivalent of a capital. In an international literary space where identity is defined by one’s aesthetic distance from Frank’s account, we might consider to what extent contemporary writers of testimony must continue to depend on that center, feeling compelled to conform their experiences to paradigm-defining texts such as Frank’s. Likewise, what expectations do we maintain as readers and consumers of testimonial narratives that may drive this identification?

Contrasted against other works of world literature, the stakes connected with the movement of testimonial narratives seem considerably higher. It is these texts that bear witness to collective memories of atrocity. And yet, while we may assume that the *Diary* transmits “Holocaust memory,” what we discover by following its translations is that such testimonies are unreliable conveyors of information. Following a text as it travels into another cultural context entails glimpsing interpretations that are often both surprising and unsettling. While this is true of world literature as a whole, when applied to atrocity testimonies, acknowledging another’s capacity to form interpretations requires us to negotiate our own practices of reading and particular claims to memory. In response to unorthodox readings of Frank’s *Diary*, for instance, Rosenfeld concludes, “If these trends continue unchecked, the Holocaust’s most famous victim will still be remembered, but in ways that may put at risk an historically accurate and morally responsible memory of the Holocaust itself.” Despite the discomfort readers may feel in response to such

interpretations, it is equally difficult to picture what an attempt to “check” such trends would actually look like. What these sentiments best illustrate is a common anxiety that, in the global circulation of texts, increased exposure to Holocaust testimonies will paradoxically lead to decreased understanding (or absolute desecration) of Holocaust memory itself.

One conclusion we can draw from the case of Frank’s *Diary* is that, whereas individual accounts now travel with relative ease, the ethics of reading by which those texts are interpreted have not traveled as well, if at all. This should cause us to seriously question the belief that culturally specific interpretations of a text are transmitted with that text as it travels. That texts such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* have proven remarkably influential around the world does not imply that such works have the power to control their own interpretation. Merely pushing certain texts into the world in an effort to educate about or prevent atrocity rarely produces what we expect. To assume we know how a single testimony educates about the Holocaust is to conflate the text itself with the consecrating authorities who attempt to set the ethical standards for reading and interpretation of that text. *The Diary of Anne Frank*, like all world atrocity literature, operates in the way that texts operate, which is to say that readers are capable of doing very different things with them.

How are we to respond to such diverse interpretations as testimonial narratives travel around the world? Our desire to share certain accounts often conceals the fact that what we really want to disseminate is our specific interpretation of those testimonies—the “real message” behind the text. But atrocity testimonies simply cannot speak for themselves. When a narrative leaves the confines of a community with shared collective memories, the results are often unexpected. As readers, we control neither the text nor the ways readerships outside of our cultural context appropriate such texts. Studying the circulation of world atrocity literature may, in the end, expose the limits of the testimonial act itself—and should cause us to reflect on the manner in which our own culture appropriates testimonial texts.

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* See Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “Anne Frank and the Future of Holocaust Memory,” United States Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, 2005.